

DAVID J. ANTOCCI



ESCAPE
escape
A NEW LIFE

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David J Antocci

After saving a drowning man during a savage storm, Abby wakes up in a tropical paradise in a fight for her life. She has no idea how she got there, and notices changes in herself that she cannot explain. Haunted by unsettling dreams of her past, she meets up with Eric, and together they set out to escape. Standing in their way is a madman, and his band of willing followers, with a mind set on murdering their unwelcome visitors. An eccentric hermit who has been living there for years offers them refuge, but they must deny his generosity. Escape is their only option. Yet, they discover this deceptive paradise is harder to leave than they had ever imagined. One mystery leads to another, until their escape throws them into even greater danger as Abby's frightening past finally catches up with her. Her escape is only the beginning.

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Books by David J Antocci

ESCAPE, A New Life

ESCAPE, Past Sins

ESCAPE, Dead End

HER EYES FLASHED open with a start as she gasped for air. Heart pounding, she reached up and felt her moist face. Her eyes were wide open, yet she saw nothing. Blackness surrounded her. She heard what sounded like white noise all around her. Reaching down to feel her body, she found that her skin was cool and wet. A blinding white light streaked across the black sky above, forcing her eyes closed for a moment. Rain. She realized that she was hearing rain beat down all around her.

She sat up, with some effort, her stomach muscles felt very sore. She felt her stomach and thought that it seemed smaller than it should be. Odd. With another flash of lightning, she saw waves pounding the beachhead in front of her. Consumed by confusion, she struggled to remember where she was. *How did I get here?* Through the haze, she knew one thing. She was soaking wet and feeling a chill. She needed a place to dry out.

Behind her she saw only trees and darkness. Ahead, she saw the blackness of water as far as her eyes could focus. To her left, she spotted a cliff jutting out of the water and up into the emptiness of the sky. There were a number of trees pushed up against what looked like an overhang off the side of the cliff. *That's probably the driest spot around here*, she thought. Pushing her wet hair out of her eyes and running her fingers through it, she couldn't help but think that it seemed a little longer than it should. She assumed that was because it

was wet. *Where the hell am I?* Her thoughts were fuzzy and she could not put the details together, as hard as she tried. She wrapped her hair around itself in a quick ponytail to keep it out of the way.

Still sitting on the sand and looking around, she wondered if there was anyone else out there. “Hello?” The crash of the waves and sounds of the storm drowned out her voice, even to herself. “HELLO!” Listening, she heard nothing. *Wait, was that someone calling?* Looking left and right as the lightning continued to flash, she saw no one—only empty beach for about a hundred yards in each direction. The sand pushed up against the cliffs on the left, and the tree line came out to meet the water on the right.

She put her left hand on the wet sand and her right hand on her thigh to brace herself to stand. Her right hand felt something hard and leathery. Her fingers traced the object. If she did not know better she would say it was a knife. Perplexed, she wondered, *Why would I have a knife strapped to my thigh?*

She managed to stand, though confusion still reigned over her senses. The rain and waves both let up for a few seconds. There it was. Someone was definitely shouting. It sounded like it was coming over the water.

Walking across the wet sand toward the crashing waves, she wondered what she was doing. She stopped to listen. Nothing. Did she imagine someone yelling? As the lightning continued to split the sky, she gasped as a flash revealed a body floating out in the water. *Who is that?* It appeared to be a man, face up, but she could not make out any of his features in the intermittent light.

Instinct kicked in, and she jumped into the water. At least it felt warm cascading over her body. Swimming out to him, she discovered that he was a big guy, lean but muscular. She hooked her left arm under his arms and across his chest. Quickly, she paddled for the shore with her free hand.

Heading toward shore with the waves was much easier than it was swimming out, until one crashed over them, driving her right elbow into a sharp rock underwater. Screaming in pain and getting to her feet, she dropped him in the water. She attempted to lift him again, but he was far too heavy. There was no way she could pick him up and carry him.

Getting her feet under her, she grabbed a fistful of his shirt and dragged him, floating on the water, toward the sand. Without warning, a large wave lifted them both and deposited them on the beach.

Lying there, her chest heaving for air, she looked at him. He had landed face up, just like in the water, but she was unable to tell if he was breathing. Barely a moment later another wave crashed on top of them. She had to get them away from the edge of the water before they were both dragged back in.

Her entire body ached from the swim. With the little strength she had left, she sat him up and grabbed him from behind, under his arms, and dragged him through the sand. She walked backwards like this for what seemed to be forever, her legs burning, toward the ledge that was overhanging the cliff.

She dropped him under the ledge where it was mostly dry.

Damp would be an accurate assessment. It was better than soaking, though. The storm seemed to be letting up quickly, and she saw surprisingly few clouds in the dark sky. Her heart still pounded, and she struggled to breathe from the effort of dragging him through the sand. Leaning down and straining her eyes, she could finally make out his face. He was handsome, yes, but not someone she knew. Her hand rested on his chest where she could feel a heartbeat, which was a good sign anyway. Leaning in closer, she felt his breath on her cheek. Even better.

She leaned back against the rock wall. She worried it would be uncomfortable, but found that it felt good right now. The cool bumpy surface of the rocks massaged her muscles as she stretched against it. Exhausted, she decided to close her eyes just for a moment.

*

The daylight made her squint when her eyes fluttered open a few hours later. Standing up, she raised her arms high above her head to stretch. Her long, dark brown hair had fallen out of its ponytail and her loose curls hung down past the midway point of her back. She took inventory of her body and determined that she was completely sore from top to bottom.

Her head, neck, shoulders, back, arms, all the way down to her toes, it all ached. At just over five feet tall, and around one hundred and twenty pounds, there was not much to her, but every inch felt as though it had been exerted to its fullest. Other girls used to tease her about being short, but she did not mind. Plenty of men liked shorter women. She had enough curves to attract more attention than she

wanted, but it was her eyes that drew in most men. She had been receiving compliments on her big, light amber eyes for as long as she could remember.

Looking at the mystery man, she saw that he was still passed out. Contrary to her build, he was a big man. He was fit; that much was obvious from the damp T-shirt that clung to his chest, but he was not too muscular or overbuilt. His sandy-colored hair was a mess at the moment, but it looked to be cropped above his ears and was probably very nice on a normal day. His face was clean-shaven, and even in his sleeping state, it appeared that he smiled easily. She could picture the dimples that must show up when he laughed.

Twisting her back, she saw that behind her was more than a sheer ledge. At the base, a cave went into the cliffside for a short distance of about five yards. The light reflecting off the water danced on the dark rock walls inside. She went back toward the small cave and stuck her head inside to examine it more closely. It was dark and damp, and very small. Without a good source of light, there was nothing much to see inside.

Opening and closing her mouth a couple of times, she felt she could really use a toothbrush and a coffee. At the very least she needed a giant glass of water. Her mouth was bone dry. Walking out from under the ledge, she stepped onto warm, white sand. Spread out in front of her was the clear blue ocean for as far as she could see. This was much nicer than it looked last night. Taking in her surroundings, she found that there were no signs of people anywhere. No lifeguard chairs, no one on the beach, not even litter on the

ground.

Why could she not remember how she wound up here? A horrible thought entered her mind. Could this man have drugged her? They could not be too far from civilization. The California coast is littered with beautiful white sand beaches like this, especially Southern California. They must have met last night and drove here. But why could she not remember a thing? She looked back into the dim light. He looked harmless enough. He possessed a sort of innocent boyish quality when she looked at him, though she knew from experience that looks could be deceiving and wondered if she should be afraid.

She stuffed her hands into the damp pockets of her shorts. No phone, of course. *Where did I get these shorts?* They were made of a thick material, but were very comfortable and had good-sized pockets. They just were not from her wardrobe. *Maybe I picked them up recently, because they look brand new.*

Her eyes traveled further down her leg and there she saw it. It was a knife. A large one, too, and the handle felt familiar somehow. Unconsciously, she flipped open the safety latch with her thumb and pulled it out of its sheath to examine the blade. It felt very comfortable and natural to hold.

Like the shorts, it looked nearly new. The blade itself was about seven inches long and had a serrated edge on one side near the base, close to the handle, which turned into a flat edge leading toward the sharp tip at the top. The handle was probably four or five inches of some sort of hard plastic composite with grooves for her fingers to sit

in. The base of the handle was capped with a shiny chrome piece.

What did I get into last night?

Sliding the knife back into the sheath and looking into the cave, she decided to let him sleep it off and question him later. The car must be on the other side of the trees. She hoped to find it unlocked so she could retrieve her phone and find something dry to wear.

About twenty feet into the trees, all she could see was more vegetation. *How deep in are we?* Walking a few more minutes through nothing but trees, she began to get a nervous feeling in the pit of her stomach. *Where exactly am I?* Looking behind her, she could still see the crystal blue water of the ocean. A warm breeze lightly filtered through the forest. It was refreshing, but seemed foreign. It made her think of her childhood – whenever she visited someplace new, even the air felt different. The trees looked different too. Untamed.

With no obvious way out, she decided that she did not want to stray too far and get lost. She figured it was better to wait until her companion woke up and fill her in on where they were. If he was a threat, at least she had a weapon.

The vegetation around her was abundant, but she did not recognize all of it. The lowlying ferns with giant leaves cradled cups of water. Her mouth was so dry that it might as well have been filled with sand. Not seeing any other alternatives, she carefully bent down to take a drink. The leaf collapsed and spilled water all over her shoes. *Wait, are those my shoes?* They were very nice, some sort of rugged half sneaker, half boot, though they definitely were not hers. Even so, they seemed to fit her perfectly.

She realized that wherever she went last night, it wasn't anywhere fancy. She was certainly not dressed to go out. The only item of clothing she had that made sense was her tank top, a staple of her wardrobe since high school.

There was a leaf next to the recently collapsed one that was also holding a good amount of water. Lying down under it and slowly tilting the leaf toward her mouth, the edge of the leaf collapsed under the weight of the water, spilling its contents all over her face and chest. *Fantastic*. She was still damp from last night; now, she was just plain soaked all over again.

Standing up, dripping, and assessing the situation, she decided not to move the next leaf at all. Bending over, she put her hands under the leaf to support it, dipped her face into the water, and sucked it up. *Wow, that tastes great*. She moved on to the next one, and then the next, until her stomach was full and her thirst quenched. She decided to head back to the beach, but then figured she should bring the mystery man some water, too. *How do I transport it?*

After several failed attempts to pluck one of the giant leaves and keep the pool of water in it, she gave up and started walking back. On the beach, she noticed dozens of tiny shells overturned in the sand, many of which held little spoonfuls of rainwater from last night. This gave her an idea. Looking around the beach, she tried to spot a larger shell.

Many of them were broken, but she finally put her hands on what looked like half of a huge clamshell. It was about the same size as the palm of her hand. It would not hold much water, but it was

better than nothing. Going back to the giant leaves, she realized that between her many failed attempts to drink, her gorging, and her efforts to pluck the leaves, there were only two remaining that held water.

She carefully scooped the water from one of the leaves into the shell, and cautiously navigated her way back to the overhang, not spilling more than a drop or two. Walking up to him, she saw that he was still sleeping. She called out to him, "Hey, uh... you? Wake up." When he did not respond, she nudged him a little with her foot. Still nothing.

She knelt down next to him and gave him a little shake with her free hand. Starting to worry, she wondered if he was dead. No, she could still see him breathing. She placed her hand on the back of his head and lifted it up, putting the shell to his lips. Some of the liquid got into his mouth and traveled just far enough for him to choke on it.

His blue eyes opened briefly, and he looked at her with a slight smile, as though he recognized her. His eyes closed again, almost immediately. She figured he must be in pretty bad shape. On the bright side, his little smile had produced two very perfect dimples, confirming her earlier suspicion. She did not want to believe that someone so adorable could be a threat, but she remained cautious. She was not known for being a very good judge of character, as her latest string of boyfriends had proved.

As she took her hand away from the back of his head, he rolled over onto his side, revealing some dried blood in his hair. She pushed on his shoulder to roll him over a bit more, so that she could inspect

the back of his head. Through his sandy blond hair she could see he had a noticeable bump on his head and a little cut on his scalp right in the middle of it. He probably hit it last night, which would explain why he passed out.

She tore some cloth from the bottom of his shirt. Using a little bit of the remaining water to wet the cloth, she cleaned the cut and his hair as best she could. In her mind, she felt like she should not be entirely at ease about being stranded here with this random guy, but in her gut, something told her to take care of him.

She left him and walked out to the beach to take in the white sand, the blue water, and the warm breeze. She figured there were worse places she could be stuck for a few hours. The sun was starting to get warm, drying out her damp clothes from last night's thorough soaking and this morning's mishap.

Checking to see that he was still lying peacefully on the sand, she walked along the beach to the far side. When she was sure that she was completely alone, she stripped down and laid her clothes out to dry on some black rocks. Looking at her body she thought she seemed smaller than she should, maybe not slimmer, but fit. Poking at her stomach she could not help but think that it should be doughier than it was. She remembered that she had been going to the gym for the past few weeks; maybe it was finally starting to pay off.

She felt very awkward just sitting there naked on a rock on the beach. She had briefly considered lying down behind the rock, but the thought of covering her backside with sand was not appealing. Someone could come along any second, or maybe this man would

finally wake up and wander out there. That would be her luck. She had only been sitting there for a few minutes and was completely dry, and expected that it would not take that long for her clothes to dry. She felt them. They were warm, but still pretty damp.

The water looked inviting, and she had not been skinny dipping since high school graduation night a few years ago. *Why not?* At least if anyone came along, she would be underwater from the neck down. She eased into the water and went out just over her head. She swam lazily along the length of the beach and back. She admired the beautiful color of the water, and the colors of the fish that occasionally swam by.

Treading water for a few minutes, she faced the beach and the trees behind it. It was beautiful. She thought that she would have to take notes on the drive home so that she could remember how to get back here.

Thinking about the man she had left back in the cave, she wondered what his story was and how they had met up. Unfortunately, this was not the first time she had woken up in an unfamiliar place in the last couple of months. She knew she had to get her life back in order, and being in this place seemed to be a wake-up call to all the beauty in the world she could experience.

She would not say that she was a drug user per se, but she had been hanging around with people who were. To be specific, a man who was, and he did not have her best interests in mind. She had always been a great student, at least until her last semester, when she started spending time with Rick. He was on the West Coast for

business. Well that was what he had told her anyway. He claimed to have ties to organized crime back in Chicago. She knew it was stupid, but something about him was charismatic and dangerous, and she was drawn to him instantly.

She was fortunate to have done well enough that last semester that she could graduate after taking a summer course to make up for one class that she had failed. Had she met him a couple years ago, she was sure she never would have made it through school. Shaking her head at the disappointment she had in herself, she felt like this was the first time she had been thinking clearly in months.

Now is the time, she thought. *Whatever this is, however I wound up here, it's time to move on. That life is over.* She felt like a big weight had been lifted off her shoulders during the twenty minutes she had spent swimming around in the water. It was time to get her life back on track. Looking back at her clothes on the rocks, she figured putting her clothes back on would be a good place to start.

First checking to make sure that no one had come along, she walked out of the water and felt her clothes. They were completely dry, unlike her. She stood there, facing the sun over the trees, and was really impressed with how she looked and felt. She felt confident. This place was so desolate she had given up on the idea that someone would come along, but she felt so good she almost didn't care if someone did. *The gym is really paying off.* She turned her back to the sun and after five minutes was completely dry. She was just buttoning her shorts when she heard a voice behind her, "Hey!"

It was damp and dimly lit, but at least the air smelled amazing. Judging by the sound of waves crashing close by and the soft ground underneath, he figured he was lying on wet sand. He had more than once woken up in a random place after a long night of partying, but the throbbing at the back of his head did not feel like too much tequila.

In fact, after he managed to sit up and take stock of himself, he was near positive that he had not had a thing to drink last night. As he took in his surroundings, he saw that he was sitting in some type of cave on a beach, and the ocean was a dozen yards or so in front of him. From his seated position, he looked out of the cave, the bright sunlight making him wish he had a pair of sunglasses. If nothing else, the brilliant blue color of the ocean and the deserted white sand was as pleasant a sight as he could ask for.

At least he thought it was as pleasant a sight as he could ask for, until he saw a beautiful woman emerge from the water one hundred yards across the other side of the beach. *Is she wearing anything?* He laughed as he remembered. *Sonofabitch.* He loved Mexico. At least that is where he assumed he was.

Slowly, he stood up and made his way into the daylight, holding his hand up over his eyes to block the sun while he looked around. Moving his head from side to side, he stretched his neck and ran his hand over the back of his head where the pain was most intense. *Yep, that's a good bump there.* If he was not drinking last night, he wondered what happened to his head.

No, this had to be his friends messing with him. Shaking his

head and chuckling, he reached into the left pocket of his cargo shorts to fish out his phone and call one of the guys to pick him up. This was a good one. They had started doing this a couple of years ago in high school, him and his buddies. It had become their tradition that if one of them passed out from overindulging, they would wake up in an odd place.

It started innocently enough. The first time, they moved his buddy Jeff from his bed, and laid him in the bathtub. The next time, they moved his buddy Phil from the couch onto the sidewalk in front of the house they rented. They progressively began moving the unfortunate one further and further from their house, which was situated about one hundred fifty miles south of Houston, Texas. There were six of them, and they found themselves waking in stranger and stranger places each time: a junkyard, a shopping mall bathroom, and the courtyard of a retirement village, just to name a few.

After the last time, they vowed the next one would wake up over the border in Mexico. It would seem that he was the lucky winner. *Very funny*. He was chuckling until he had gone through all of his pockets, twice, to find that they were completely empty. They would not be cruel or mean enough to leave him with nothing and be too far away, would they?

He looked around the beach, but aside from the beautiful woman on the other side, there was no one. She was partially hidden behind some rocks putting on her clothes. *Yep, she hadn't been wearing a thing*. He regretted he had not been close enough to see much of anything, but decided that was probably for the best anyway. In the

back of his mind, he could hear his grandmother scolding him for even having the thought. His grandmother had been a big influence in his life when he was growing up, and had taught him to always respect women. He figured he could strike up a conversation anyway. At the very least, she could tell him where he was.

Having walked across the beach, he was about twenty feet behind her when he called out, “Hey!”

SHE JUMPED, arms flailing in surprise. “Hey, yourself,” she said, maybe just a little too angrily. “You scared me half to death.”

“Sorry about that, I wasn’t sure what to say.”

She looked at him closely. He was smirking. He was trying not to, but he had a little smirk in the corner of his mouth. She narrowed her eyes, “How much did you see just now?”

His smirk turned into a gentle smile and his dimples came out again, “Nothing I haven’t seen before.”

She sized him up, “Nothing you haven’t seen on *me* before, or just in general?”

“In general,” he chuckled.

She laughed, “I’m sorry. I really don’t remember a thing about last night, or how we got here.” She thought he looked a little concerned.

Slowly he asked, “What do you mean, how *we* got here?”

“Last night, when we were on the beach,” she said matter-of-factly. “I have no idea how that happened. I’m sorry, I know this must sound weird, but I don’t really remember you. I’m Abby.” She held out her hand.

He stared, a bit dumbfounded for a moment. As she rolled back the tape in her mind to figure out what she might have said to confuse him, he finally spoke. “Well,” he said, extending a hand, “I’m Eric, and I guess we’re in the same boat.”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, I just woke up by those rocks over there and saw this very pretty girl out on the beach. I wandered over because I was hoping you could tell me where I am.”

“Wait, you didn’t drive us here?”

“Didn’t drive us here? I’m sorry, Abby is it?”

She nodded her head.

“I’m sorry, Abby, but no, I didn’t drive us here. I don’t know where here is.”

She looked around, concerned, and sat down on one of the rocks. It was the middle of the morning as far as she could tell, but she suddenly felt very tired and overwhelmed. She was thoroughly worn out from the adrenaline and panic of the past twelve hours. “I figured we came here together,” she said, confused. “What do you remember about last night?”

He thought back. His memory was fuzzy. He had so readily assumed his friends had dumped him here that he had not put much thought into what lead up to that. Looking at the water he remembered, “There was a real bad storm, wasn’t there?” He looked around, slowly remembering more. He stared up at the cliffs above the cave for some time before he spoke, trying to put together what happened.

He pointed, “I must have been on top of those cliffs there. I thought I could hear someone calling out, so I stood up to have a look and...” he lost his thought for a moment and felt the back of his head. “I must have walked right off the edge up there. After that, I don’t

remember a thing.”

“How about before that?”

“Before that? Before that, I think I just got home from work, and, well, I’m not sure. I’ll tell ya, I thought I had this one figured out, but I’m a little short on the details to tell you the truth.”

“Well, Eric, you’re right. It looks as though we are in the same boat.” She told him how she woke up last night on the beach. She was the voice he heard calling out. She recounted seeing him in the water, and though she did not see him fall, she said she would believe it, seeing as he was unconscious when she found him and fished him out of the water.

He looked impressed, “Well, thank you, Abby, I guess I owe my life to you. Now, how about we find our way through these trees and hope there’s a bar on the other side so I can buy you a drink?” He flashed an insanely charming smile.

“Well, I already went in there, and there’s not much but trees. I was hoping you would know the way.”

He thought a minute, “So we’re both here, but neither of us remember how we got here. Neither of us knows where we are.” He thought a moment. “I assume you don’t have a phone on you either?”

Abby shook her head.

Eric was still clinging to his original thought. It was the only thing that made sense at the moment, “Any chance you know Phil or Jeff? A couple buddies of mine. Sometimes we pull pranks on each other, drop each other off in random places when we are... let’s say less than conscious.”

That thought had not occurred to her. Suddenly her eyes lit up, “I know Phil! We took some classes together last semester.”

“Last semester, as in college? No, Phil isn’t in college. Damn.” He thought about it, “We must have some mutual friends who are in on this.”

Of course, she did not think that any of her girlfriends would do something like this. She was not close enough to any of her friends that they would play pranks on each other. “No, I don’t think so.”

“We must. That’s the only thing that makes sense. Where are you from?”

“Anaheim. I assume we’re somewhere a few hours South. If not, it’s awfully warm here for the fall.”

He laughed. “California? Jeez...”

“How about you?”

“Texas. I was figurin’ we must be on the coast, or in Mexico. Which is definitely something my buddies would pull off.”

It was her turn to laugh. “You have friends that would drop you off on a beach in Mexico if you were passed out drunk?”

“Well... yeah.” He seemed confused that this would confuse her.

“Nice friends,” she said wryly. “But I can’t imagine we’re in Mexico, at least not on the Gulf side. I guess we could be on the West Coast, though. Any chance your friends would dump you there?”

He thought about it and laughed a bit, “They’re crazy, but not that crazy. Plus, it’s a twenty-hour ride to Tijuana from where I live, and that’s if you drive straight through. Unless I lost an entire day,

that doesn't make any sense."

"What do you do for work?"

"I swing a hammer."

Abby furrowed her brow.

"I'm a construction worker. Build houses."

"Ah." She looked him over. That explains the nice tan and good physique. She figured that heaving lumber all day in Texas would give you that look.

"You?"

"I just graduated over the summer. Well, finished my last classes. Not much of a graduation ceremony for summer students, but the degree is the same."

He drummed his fingers on his legs, "I have no clue what's going on, but I'm thirsty, and I'm not one to sit around waiting for things to happen. I'm going to take a look in those trees. Want to join me?"

Abby considered it. Still sitting on one of the rocks, she was dead tired and frankly did not want to move at the moment. The thought of aimlessly wandering through the forest did not appeal to her. "I already explored a little bit. Didn't find anything. Do you mind if I stay here for a few? Just promise me that when you find a way out you'll come back to get me."

He smiled, "You can count on it." He headed off into the trees and was out of view in under a minute.

Abby climbed down off the rock and found a cool shady spot in the sand. Maybe it was the workout she had last night in the water, or

maybe it was the anxiety of not knowing where she was. Maybe it was a little bit of both. Either way, she felt as though she had been hit by a truck. Settling down into a soft, comfortable spot, she figured it could not hurt to close her eyes for a few minutes. Could it?

Eric searched in vain for a road for hours. He was careful to stick close to what seemed to be the only path through the trees. He certainly did not want to get lost and not find his way back to the beach. Plus, he figured it had to lead somewhere. He thought about the girl back there waiting for him. *What are the chances I get to meet a beautiful woman and be her hero on the same day?* Now he just had to find a road or other sign of civilization to fulfill that possibility.

As he walked, he tried to think about their situation, but it was an endless, frustrating loop playing through his mind. They obviously seemed to be here together, or at least seemed to be here for the same reason. But exactly what that was he could not figure out. He decided to put it from his mind for the time being and concentrate on finding a way out. He would worry about the why and how they got here once they were laughing about the whole experience over drinks later.

He was looking for high ground, some vantage point where he would be able to see for a distance and look for some type of road or landmark. He remembered being on the cliff above the cave last night. *How did I get up there?* He could not remember and was kicking himself for not thinking of it hours ago when he was back at the beach. Unfortunately, another such opportunity did not readily present itself. He did find some small hills, but the trees were too tall

for him to see much of anything. That was until he came to the edge of a very large clearing.

Looking across the clearing, he figured it was easily the length of several football fields. On the other side of the open space were more trees, but it was obvious that the tree-covered ground went up. Way up. In fact it looked like the incline continued for several miles to the top of a very high hill. He looked at the sun getting low in the sky. It had taken him several hours to get this far, and he did not want to be caught stumbling through the trees once the sun went down. Plus, he did not want to leave Abby alone on the beach thinking he had abandoned her.

He figured he would be able to get back this way easily enough tomorrow. They could both come out and climb the hill together in the daylight. *Hell, there are tougher situations to be in*, he thought. He figured he could do worse than camping out on the beach for a night with a good-looking girl.

She woke up from her nap when he returned a few hours later. He was looking rather proud of himself, carrying an armful of wood in one arm and what looked like a bush in the other hand.

He tossed down the wood and sat next to her. “You’re right – there ain’t nothin’ out there. No roads or people anyway. I did find us some dinner, though.” He held up the bush.

“Well, then, Mr. Wilderness Man, how exactly do we prepare this shrub?”

He smiled. “Honeysuckle. This stuff grows all over my

grandfather's ranch. Been eatin' them since I was a kid." He showed her how to pop the back off the flower and suck the sweet nectar out. He held one out for her.

"I thought those were poisonous," she stated, more than asked.

"Some are, but not all of them. You have to know which kind you can eat." Again, he held one out for her, hoping she would join him.

She looked at his offering and was tempted. Unable to remember the last time that she ate, she nearly reached out and took one from him, but she stopped herself. She was still not entirely sure that she could trust him, and regretted not going into the trees with him to see for herself that there was no obvious route out. She was torn, but did not want to be poisoned. She decided to wait until he had a few first. "I'm OK for now, thanks. How about the wood?"

"Fire!" He was very enthusiastic. "I figure the sun will be going down soon, and we seem to be stuck here for tonight. I'll get a fire going to keep us warm." He raised his eyebrows and smiled, looking for approval.

"I'll be more impressed when we find our way out of here and figure out what the hell is going on."

They didn't speak for a while, but she did get thirsty. The sun was indeed fading and she had not had anything to drink since morning. With the exception of her swim, she had done her best to stay out of the sun for most of the day, but it was still hot.

She decided to give the flowers a try, as he had no apparent reaction to them. Very sweet, not thirst quenching at all, but it was

something. Then she had an idea and disappeared into the trees for a while to collect some more of those giant leaves. She arranged them in little indentations in the sand around their camp. If it rained again, they would have water in the morning. If it did not rain, at least they might collect some dew.

It was dusk, and Eric was going on hour two of his effort to get a fire started. She sat down on the sand next to him, “You ever do this before?”

He looked up, continuing to rub the sticks together without stopping, “Nope.”

“Why don’t you take a break? Let me have a try?”

He stopped and looked at her. At first he appeared intent on continuing his quest, then seeing that his palms were starting to look red and worn, conceded. “Sure, why not?”

Abby picked up one of the sticks to examine it. It was very warm, but not hot. It was not about to catch fire anytime soon.

She looked over the rest of the wood. There were larger pieces, and some smaller sticks for kindling. She had never started a fire before, but was struck by a sudden flash, like she was remembering having seen someone do this. She knew what to do.

Going to the edge of the trees, she picked up some dried leaves and brought them back to the woodpile. She sat cross-legged in front of the wood and tore up the dried leaves into small chunks until she had a nice fist-sized pile. Next, she made a teepee over the leaves with some smaller sticks, and then sat there looking at her handiwork.

Eric had been leaning against the rock wall under the ledge,

watching her hard at work. “What now?”

She did not look up. She just stared and concentrated. Her hand unconsciously reached down and slid her knife from its sheath. She sat looking at the knife, looking at her pile of leaves and sticks, then back at the knife. She thought she was having *déjà vu*, except she was positive she had not done this before.

She examined the knife. The chrome cap at the back of the knife handle caught her eye. She held it firm with her right hand. With her left hand wrapped around the grip of the knife, she pulled back hard on the cap, gave it a slight counterclockwise twist, and the back of the knife slid out with a pop. In her right hand, she held the cap and a black rod that fit into the knife handle. The small rod appeared to either have been made from stone, or covered in some type of stone.

Her mind snapped into focus. She held the small rod to the ground against the leaves. It was at an angle, with the bottom of it touching the base of the leaves, and the top in her hand a few inches off the ground. She held the back of her knife to the rod and scraped the steel down the length of it.

A shower of sparks sprung from the rod, landing on the leaves, instantly setting them on fire. She gently blew on the kindling and within a minute, her entire structure was ablaze.

“Son of a bitch,” Eric muttered from behind her.

She stood without looking away from her little fire. “Well, there you go. I got it started. Have at it!” she turned and smiled at him.

He had never started a fire like that, but he had obviously spent time around a campfire or two. He quickly stacked the wood, and within twenty minutes, they had a blazing fire. It was a little too warm to stand next to for long.

She sat back away from the fire to examine her knife. The back of it was still disconnected and in her hand. It was definitely a little black rock of some sort, or maybe a thin metal rod covered in rock. It also looked like there was a rubber seal around the edge of the handle backing, she figured to keep out moisture.

She peered into the now hollow handle and could see something in there. She reached in with her finger and felt something soft. Using her fingernail she dug out six cotton balls and gave a grunt. *Built-in fire starter. Smart.*

Sitting there, she did not know where she was, what she was doing there, or how she got to this moment in time. What she did know was that whoever strapped this knife to her leg was looking out for her. They also knew that she was going to be here for a lot longer than a day.

IT DID IN FACT BECOME cold after the sun went down. They had built the fire at the mouth of the cave and slept near the opening. The sand inside of the cave was packed hard, as if it had been wet at one point; however, the water had not come up that far in the few hours they had spent there. The fire at the entrance kept the temperature perfect inside. They decided that they would spend the night here, and if the tide started to get close, they would move. Eric had volunteered to stay up and tend to the fire for a while so they would not get cold.

Hours later, Abby woke up, cold and her feet a little damp. She drowsily opened her eyes and figured that Eric must have fallen asleep on duty. It was black in the cave. Between being half asleep and facing near total darkness, she could not make out a thing other than the faint glow of the embers from the fire. She listened closely and finally heard his breathing somewhere just behind her. She smiled knowing he was close. She also heard the crash of a wave. She thought it seemed closer than it should. Assuming that the sound was just bouncing off the walls of the cave and playing tricks with her ears, she quickly dismissed the thought.

She sat up and looked at the glowing embers a few feet away at the entrance. She thought about getting up and putting some kindling and another log on to rebuild the fire. Before she could summon the will to move, there was a sudden hiss and the embers disappeared. A second later, she felt the ocean water lap at her feet and run up her

thighs.

She quickly turned to wake up Eric. Apparently the water did come up this far, and they should move before it came any farther and soaked them. Calling out to Eric, she reached behind her, searching for him to shake him awake. Only she did not move as fast as Mother Nature. A wave crashed on top of her from behind, throwing her forward. In an instant she collided with him. As the wave quickly retreated, they were left on the wet sand, piled on top of each other.

After choking up a mouthful of salt water, he managed to shout, "What that hell!" Just then the next wave crashed into them, pushing them end over end, further into the cave.

In the dark, they made a silent agreement that they must get out of this death trap. The cave was not tall enough for them to stand up, so they stayed on their hands and knees and tried to crawl out. The next wave hit and they both caught it square in the face. Abby was thrown upward and smacked her head on the ceiling, leaving her dizzy, but conscious.

Their hands found each other in the darkness, and they quickly scurried toward the moonlit opening as the water retreated. They knew there was not much time. As soon as they cleared the cave and were under the lip of the opening, they stood up to run. Just then, the next wave – the biggest one yet – crashed into them.

Their hands lost each other as Abby was thrown backward against the stone face of the cliff. Catching a sharp rock in her lower back, the pain seared through her body, and she went limp like a fish. As the water retreated, she was dragged out with it, until Eric grabbed

the back of her shirt and lifted her up. “Come on!” he yelled as he began sloshing through the knee-deep water toward dry ground.

Given his much taller stature, he had stayed sure on his feet. Abby took two steps and pain shot through her lower back causing her to lose her balance, falling backwards into the water. Eric turned to see her flailing on her back, and he bounded back into the water to scoop her up. He carried her to the dry sand before gently setting her down.

On the beach, near the tree line and well out of range of the water, he collapsed on the sand next to her. They held each other while their labored breathing found rhythm together. As they sat there trying to digest what just happened, Abby was overcome by a feeling of safety and confidence. She felt at home with this stranger and confident in herself. When she was in the cave, the thought that they would not make it out had never crossed her mind, despite the difficulties they had. Abby knew he would pull her out. She buried her head in his shoulder and as the adrenaline wore off she crashed and fell asleep, soaking wet, but happy.

“I need water,” Abby said from the comfort of the sand, her head still lying against his shoulder. It was morning, the sun was up, and it had been nearly twenty-four hours since she last had anything to drink. The piercing headache that radiated from the back of her skull to her forehead could be the result of dehydration, or her collision with the ceiling of the cave last night. Either way, she intended to rule out one of the possibilities.

Eric stood to stretch. "That makes two of us."

She looked over at what had been their shelter, where she had laid out the large leaves to collect the morning dew. They were gone with the tide, like everything else that had been in there. Suddenly she was gripped by panic and frantically sat up and grabbed at her right thigh. The knife was still there. She slid it from its sheath to find that aside from being damp, it was fine. She popped open the back and was happy to find that the rubber seal had done its job well and kept the flint and the cotton fire starter dry.

Sliding the knife back into the sheath and locking the safety latch she announced, "Well, it's obvious we're not getting anywhere sitting on this beach."

Eric nodded his head. "Agreed. I say we hike into the trees. A couple hours in yesterday I saw a huge clearing and a pretty big hill on the other side."

"Good thinking. If nothing else, we can climb that and have a look around."

"Exactly what I was thinking."

"Maybe even figure out where we are. If we can spot a road from up there, we'll be in good shape to find our way back."

He looked at her confused. "Back to where?"

She laughed. "Anywhere but here."

They spent the next several hours making their way through the trees and looking out for water. They found some dewy leaves here and there where they were able to get a few drops. However, they never saw anything substantial, nothing that was going to satisfy

their thirst.

“What’s your story anyway?” he asked.

“What do you mean?”

“Your story. I mean, you seem like you can take care of yourself. You’ve got this knife strapped to your thigh. You’re in great shape. You almost seem like you belong out here.”

Abby thought about that as they walked across the clearing toward the hill in the distance. He did have a point. She may have been lost, but she still felt as though she was exactly where she was supposed to be.

“Well, I guess I’m not entirely sure what my story is. I thought I was at the end of a fun summer after graduation. I thought I was going to start seriously job hunting. Somehow, I found myself lost out here with some random guy.” She shook her head. “Honestly, I have no idea.”

He chuckled. “Well, however it turns out, it’s been... fun isn’t the right word, but if I’m going to wind up in whatever this is, you seem like a good person to be in it with. I’m glad to have met you.” He looked ahead at the fairly steep side of the hill they were about to climb.

“Straight up?” she asked.

“That’s the plan.”

The path narrowed as they climbed closer to the top, though every time she thought they were about to reach the top, the next crest brought more hills.

They came to a rock face, about ten yards wide and half as tall.

On each side of their path was a small incline followed by a sharp drop off. Eric carefully stepped toward the drop off and looked down letting out a long whistle. A fall from this height would be certain death. Directly in front of them, the path abruptly ended at this wall of rock. It was a worn-out, gray-looking rock that was anything but smooth. Covered with cracks, both large and small, there were several young trees growing out of it horizontally.

Eric looked around, visibly annoyed. "Well, that's just..."

She held her finger over her lips. "Do you hear that?"

He listened and heard nothing.

She walked up to the rock wall and closed her eyes to concentrate. She moved to the left side and smiled, motioning him closer. "Listen."

This time he heard it and smiled. They could hear the faint trickle of water. It must be running down the left side of the rock. They just could not see it past the drop off on the side of their path. "I say we go straight up. If there's water running down the side, there's got to be some up there."

"Perfect," Abby said. "Give me a boost."

He looked up. "How about I climb up there and lower a branch or something to help you scale this thing?"

She protested. "I'm sure I can climb this just as easy as you."

"Really?" he asked. Smiling, he turned to the wall, and scaled the entire face in twenty seconds flat. Looking back down, he announced, "We had a rock wall at my summer camp growing up. I've had years of practice, sweetie. Sit tight for a minute. Let me find

something to help you up.” With that, he disappeared from view.

Abby studied the path he had taken. He had stuck his foot in the crack right in front of her. After that he grabbed the small tree about eight feet up, and used the other cracks above that to pull himself up. She could do this.

She stuck her right foot into a crack in the wall that was just a little lower than her hip. She threw her small body upwards, grabbing at the small tree that was growing out of the wall. Missing it with near comic timing, she fell straight down, landing flat on her back.

She grunted and let out a little cry of pain. Her right shoulder had struck a fist size rock, and absorbed the full weight of her body on impact. She rolled over and stood up. With a groan, she flexed her shoulder, moving it around. Nothing was broken, but she was in serious pain. She stood looking straight up to the top of the wall. *I can do this.* She firmly wedged her right foot into the same crack and counted to three before once again throwing herself upward. She didn’t even have a chance to miss grabbing onto the small tree this time. As soon as her arm tried to extend over her head, pain shot through her shoulder and her arm went no further.

She hung in the air for a brief moment, but was unable to maintain balance with only one foot stuck in the wall and her other three limbs floundering in the air. She fell backwards again, this time twisting her body in an effort to avoid the small rock she had struck before. In a poorly considered plan, Abby managed to avoid the rock by tumbling left, toward the sharp drop off on the side of the path.

Tumbling down the incline toward the drop off she let out a

yelp each time she rolled onto her right shoulder. On the third roll she reached out with her left hand and grabbed a sapling that was sticking out of the ground, barely eighteen inches tall. The bottom half of her body continued to slide on the fallen leaves and loose earth, toward the drop off, as the roots of the tiny tree strained to hold her weight.

She stopped sliding just as her feet had found their way over the edge. Abby hung there in space, her legs dangling in mid-air from the knees down. She lay like this, perfectly still on her stomach, with her left hand gripping the young tree that had saved her life. Slowly she shuffled forward on her stomach. Standing up only once she was sure that both feet were on solid ground.

Walking back to the rock wall, she sat down at the base and leaned against it while she waited for her breathing to return to normal. She reluctantly decided to wait for Eric's return before making another attempt at scaling the wall. He returned about fifteen minutes later and lowered a strong vine to help her up. She wrapped the vine around her right arm so that if her shoulder gave out again and she lost her grip, at least she would not fall this time. Eric did most of the pulling, and using her left hand and the cracks in the wall to her advantage, she made it to the top. He grabbed under her right shoulder to hoist her the final distance and she gasped in pain.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing, I just fell on my shoulder. I'll be fine."

"When did that happen?"

"Just now," she said, rubbing her shoulder. "I was getting impatient."

He shook his head. "Sorry, I couldn't help myself. I did a little exploring before I helped you up there." He gestured in the direction of a small brook. "Thirsty?"

She just about ran over to the weak little stream of water and dropped to her knees next to it. Scooping handfuls of clean, clear water, she drank her fill until her stomach could not hold anymore. Once she was full, she lay on her back, looking up at the blue sky above. The top of the mountain was bare of trees. The only vegetation was a short grass, through which dark black areas of rock showed through in places.

She let out a sigh. "Wherever we are, this place sure is beautiful, if nothing else."

"It sure is," he admitted, less than enthusiastic about it.

Abby noticed that he seemed uneasy. Something was wrong. "Everything OK? We found water. You should be happy about that at least. Make the best of it."

He pointed to indicate the short distance to the top of the hill, or what they were now considering a small mountain. "That's the peak," he paused. "I had to go that way to find the vine, so I took a quick look. I'm not sure what to say."

She gave him a curious look. She figured she might as well see whatever there was to see. It was about fifty yards to the top. With her thirst satisfied, she had a newfound energy and outlook, and happily covered the distance while Eric tried his best to keep up.

Abby reached the top well ahead of him. She was breathing heavily, but was generally surprised at how good she felt. She looked

around. The very top of the crest was still a twenty-foot climb above her. So far she had not found anything too odd. There was a pile of charred wood off to the side. Someone had a pretty big fire going here at some point.

The pile looked as if it had been there for quite awhile. There was not much ash. It had probably blown away over time. There was a pile of very large logs that were probably close to a yard in length each. They were at various stages of having been burned. Off to the side there were six or seven more large logs that had not been burned at all, though they seemed to have been weathered quite a bit. Whatever its purpose, it did not appear that the fire had been lit at any point in recent months. Dismissing the charred wood, she climbed up the last few yards to the peak, using her hands to steady herself on the unlevel terrain. Reaching the crest, she stood up to take in the scene.

In front of her, the mountain ran down at about the same incline they had just climbed. Past that, the tree line started. Approximately six or seven miles past the trees, as far as she could see, was the crystal blue clear water of the ocean. Abby looked right, then quickly to the left, and then back in the direction where they had come from that morning, and the same scene played out all around her.

Her skin became hot and flush with panic as her heart beat in her throat. She started breathing in uncontrolled short rapid bursts and quickly became lightheaded as her world was flipped upside down. She felt completely helpless, as the pit of her stomach seemed

to sink past her knees.

They were not on some beach in California or even Mexico. There was no road that was going to bring them home. They were on an island.

“My God,” she whispered.

SHE TURNED AROUND to face Eric, who had finally caught up.

“What the hell is this?” She screamed, “We’re on an island!”

“I’m just as confused as you are.”

She pushed past him, her mind racing to fill in the blanks. Why would she be on an island? How in the world did she get here? How come she could not remember a damned thing?

Eric was markedly calmer. He sat, staring off at the ocean in the distance. “There’s another island over there, on the other side,” he said.

“I see that,” Abby snapped back. “How do you propose we get there?”

He looked back at her with a blank expression. “I wasn’t suggesting we do. How do we even know we want to get there? I was just pointing it out.” He was clearly hurt.

“Sorry,” she said. “I just can’t put the pieces together here. I’m frustrated.”

“I get it. We’re in the same boat... well, not a boat actually, though that would be helpful, huh?”

She smiled.

From their vantage point, they could see the entire island. There was no sign that anyone else was here. No houses, no phone towers, no manmade structures that they could see. Mostly what they could see were the tops of the trees that made up the lush vegetation

on the island. They could not see all of the beaches, but there were no docks, boats, or anything else visible along the water line that would indicate there were other people there.

As far as they could tell, they were all alone.

Abby felt a familiar anxiety in the pit of her stomach, the kind of anxiety that goes with loss of control. She was on an island with this stranger and had no idea how to get off. *Can I trust him?* She weighed the question in her mind. Looking at him, he certainly appeared to be just as baffled as she was. There was something familiar about him, too. Although they had only known each other for little more than a day, something about him was familiar. Whether that made sense was another question, but for now she decided to accept the comfort that his familiarity seemed to offer.

They sat silent and overwhelmed at their situation. Neither had any ideas at the moment. Eric reached out and took her hand in his. “Hey, we’ll figure this out. Don’t worry.”

She looked at him and felt very calm. “I’m not worried.” She gave him a reassuring smile.

“I know you’re not,” he chuckled, “and I can’t tell if that freaks me out, or makes me feel better.”

She laughed.

“At least we’re a good team,” he said.

Holding his large hand, she noticed that it felt hard and calloused. No doubt he had been working with his hands for a long time. She gave him a squeeze with her small soft hand before she let go. Abby admired the ocean in the distance. There was something

moving slowly out on the water. Something very distant and very large.

She stood and squinted. “A ship!” she shouted. “Or a boat. I don’t know what it is, but look.”

He looked up. “I don’t see anything.”

“Come here!” She yanked him up and pulled him close. Holding her head against his, she directed his eyes toward the ocean. Their sudden closeness and the smell of his skin distracted her, if only for a second, until she pointed. “There.”

“Son of a bitch! You’re right.”

Abby looked below and saw the pile of half-charred wood. His eyes followed hers, and they both had the same thought. He piled the wood like a tepee and she quickly lit some kindling under it with her blade and flint. The sticks and dry charred wood were burning in a full blaze within minutes.

“Toss on some more logs,” she told him. “I’m going to get some leaves.”

“Leaves?”

“They’ll make smoke.”

He stopped and stared at her. “How do you know these things?” Sometimes Abby impressed herself. How did she know that? She must have seen it on TV or something.

Running into the trees, she tore her knife from its sheath and began hacking thin low lying branches as quickly as she could. She set her sights on branches no thicker than her thumb that were covered in leaves. The knife was so sharp that it took no more than a swift strike

from the blade to slice them from the trees. She arrived back within ten minutes, carrying armfuls of branches. Using the charred wood and some of the well-weathered logs, Eric had successfully built up a very large fire by that point.

“These half-burnt logs are going up quick,” he said.

She began piling on the leaf-covered branches, and within minutes the fire produced thick, dark smoke.

Eric began jogging down toward the trees. He called back over his shoulder, “I’m going to grab some more branches, let’s make this thing huge!”

Abby tossed the rest of her branches onto the blaze and decided to head up to the higher summit to get a better look at the ship. Once up there, she could not quite make out what it was, but it was big. Probably a cruise ship, seeing as though it was gleaming white.

Eric returned, struggling to carry the huge amount of greenery that he had stolen from the trees. He fanned the flame for a bit, and then tossed them on piece by piece, being careful not to smother the flame. The smoke billowed so thick that they could not see through it.

He climbed up to her and announced with pride, “No way they’ll miss that. Should we start heading down toward the beach to meet them now?”

Without saying anything, Abby just shook her head no. They sat on the rocky summit and watched the ship for ten minutes, thirty minutes, an hour, as it sailed on without the slightest hint that it might change course.

“They *must* see it”, he said. “Maybe they can’t stop, but I’m sure

they'll report it to someone."

A deep, rough voice came from their left. "I wouldn't count on it."

They both jumped, nearly smacking their heads together, careening to the right to see where the voice had come from. Sure enough there was a man. He was rather gruff-looking. Abby figured he looked a few years older than she was, probably closer to Eric's age, which she figured to be early thirties. It was hard to tell, though.

He was dressed in something that may have been a pair of cargo shorts at one point, though now was mostly brown cloth being held around his waist by a vine. He wore no shirt and was very lean. His dark brown, dirty hair hung below his ears, and he wore a beard that matched his hair in both color and cleanliness, or lack thereof.

Eric started to introduce himself, but the bearded man went on as if he did not notice. "I've been here nearly a year, as far as I can tell." He paused, his vacant gray eyes looking out toward the ship. "I can't tell you how many signal fires I lit those first few months. No ship ever changed its course. For a while I had the same thought – they can't just go visit any island with smoke coming from it, but they will report it to someone. Eventually someone will come." He shook his head, chuckling at himself. "No one ever has. It's like we don't exist."

The three of them stood silent for a moment, the massive fire crackling below them, sending up smoke and sparks, and radiating intense heat into the already warm air, making an awkward situation even more uncomfortable.

Abby spoke up. "Well, what do we do then?"

The man smiled at her with a twinkle in his eye. "We find out why you came here."

From behind a sack was thrown over her head, and a pair of strong arms grabbed her. She screamed, and heard Eric struggling as well. As her feet came off the ground, she twisted around, but soon realized she was fighting a losing battle. She was going wherever it was they were taking her, whether she wanted to or not.

5

THEY HAD BEEN SITTING in front of the fire for some time before their heads were uncovered. Their feet were bound and tied with the same type of vine Eric had lowered to help Abby up the rock face. Their wrists were bound behind their backs. This was somehow a familiar feeling to Abby, and she did not like it at all.

It was dark, and the damp air was cool, but the fire was warm. She was thankful for that at least.

Three people stared at them across the fire. The bearded man sat smugly, playing with a knife. Glancing down at the empty sheath on her right thigh, Abby realized that it was her knife.

Two women sat with him, one on each side. They were rough looking, similar to the man. They were both thin. *Too thin*, Abby thought. Judging by the appearance of their clothes, they must have been here awhile, too. Each wore a tattered shirt, and canvass shorts, similar to the ones that Abby wore, only faded and torn in places.

Eric spoke first. "What did you say your name was again?"

The man looked up at him and spat the words, "I didn't."

Abby and Eric exchanged glances.

"I'll be asking the questions for now," the man went on. He leaned over toward the fire and rested the knife on a rock so the tip of it was sitting in the hot embers at the edge. Abby could only imagine what his intention might be.

“Go ahead,” Abby smiled at his bearded face.

The man looked her over. “Your clothes look awfully nice,” he observed. “Ya think they’d fit my lady here?” He gestured toward the woman on his right. “How about you say we find out?”

“Don’t even think about it.” Eric said, staring hard at the man, his arms straining at their bonds.

He laughed. “Oh, I’m thinking about it,” he said, licking his lips. “So how did you come to find yourselves on our little slice of heaven?”

Abby sighed. “We don’t know.”

“Is that so?”

“We woke up here a couple nights ago, during the storm. We’ve been trying to put the pieces together, but so far haven’t had much luck.”

“Uh-huh. You have that pretty well rehearsed do you?”

“What do you mean, ‘rehearsed?’”

The bearded man looked at the two women, then back at his captives. “I mean you don’t look like the others. We’ve been watching you look for us all day. Looks to me like you’re on a mission.”

“What kind of mission would that be?”

He smiled, his dirty teeth showing through his beard. He picked up the knife and held it up. Inspecting the slight glow at the tip, he said, “Well, that’s what I aim to find out.”

As the man leaned forward to stand up, Abby took action. Kicking out with her bound feet she sent a cloud of ash and embers flying up into the faces of the others. The man caught the worst of it

and grabbed at his eyes, dropping the knife. Abby saw that his eyes might be the least of his problems. One of the embers landed in his beard and his face began to smoke.

In one continuous motion Abby slid her arms down past her backside, pulled her legs through so that her hands were now in front of her, and sprung forward onto the ground reaching out for the knife. One of the women saw her and pushed past the man to grab the knife herself. Abby spun on her hip and kicked up with both legs. Her feet connected with the woman's stomach, sending the woman reeling backwards toward the fire. Landing next to it, her makeshift clothes caught fire. The woman began rolling on the ground, screaming. Abby saw the red hair of the other woman quickly disappear into the trees.

Grabbing the knife Abby cut the ties at her hands and feet. The red-hot blade sliced through the fresh green vines like butter. She turned to Eric who sat in shock, mouth open. "Come on!" she yelled at him, rapidly cutting the ties at his wrists.

His eyes widened. "Watch out!"

The woman who had fallen into the fire had apparently extinguished herself and was coming up quick. Abby spun, knife extended from her hand, slashing downward as though wielding a tomahawk. The hot blade sliced across the left side of the woman's face. The woman dropped to the ground, screaming.

"Where did the other one go?"

Abby sliced the vines off of his feet. "I don't know, but let's not stick around to find out."

She grabbed his hand and they sprinted into the trees. The

bearded man lay moaning on the ground, his woman whimpering next to him.

Running into the trees, they did not get far before they heard the voices of several men coming from behind them. They ran through the trees and thick brush for several hundred yards. The voices were distant, but still coming in their direction.

They stopped to listen.

Eric asked, "Should we hide or keep running?"

Abby thought about it. "What time do you suppose it is?"

They both looked up, trying to find some sort of signal from the sky. Was dawn approaching? Had the sun just gone down? It was impossible to tell. "I have no idea."

Abby decided, "They obviously know the area better than we do. Hiding might help us now. But if we're still hiding when the sun comes up, and they are still looking for us, we're going to be in trouble."

"Good point." He thought about it for a moment. "Let's change direction, though. They seem to know exactly where we're heading."

It was tough to see by the moonlight, but there was a hill to their left, and they decided to head up and over it. They made short work of the incline, stopping at the top to catch their breath. The voices did not seem to be getting any closer, but that did not make Abby feel any better. They had to keep moving.

They ran down the side of the hill, crashing through branches. Suddenly, at the bottom of the hill, the ground came out from under her feet and she landed with a splash. Water! They stopped to listen.

Though it was hard to hear over the babbling water and their heavy breathing, the voices seemed to have stopped.

They quickly drank their fill, and their breathing began to slow. That was when they heard branches rustling at the top of the hill. They could not see anything up there, but the others must have heard the noise she made when she landed in the water. They had been found.

“I don’t think they see us,” Eric whispered, taking her hand. “Let’s be real quiet and head upstream. If we stay along the water, hopefully the noise will mask any sounds we make.”

Abby nodded her head and they stood together to turn upstream. An arm’s length away was a man they had not seen before. Abby screamed in surprise. The man looked just as surprised at her screaming. His features were difficult to distinguish in the dark. He was not quite as tall as Eric, and not as broad. His hair was a little longer, down just past his ears, and he had a beard that was trimmed short. He wore a plain white tee shirt, khaki shorts and some rugged looking shoes. Unlike the others, he looked clean and in good health.

“There they are!” came a voice from the top of the hill.

Eric swung a right hook, which the man expertly ducked, landing a light jab into Eric’s ribs, temporarily knocking the wind out of him. Abby reached for her knife.

“Do not,” the man whispered harshly, holding out his hand. “I am here to help.”

They could hear the other men crashing down the side of the hill, making no attempt at stealth. Eric was still holding his side, but

was all right.

The man quickly said, “You can follow me to safety, or you can run around here like idiots, waiting to be caught by those lunatics,” jerking his head toward the hill where the men were closing in. “Trust me, they know this place better than you. They will catch you. But I guarantee I know these trees better than anyone.”

Abby and Eric looked at each other, temporarily paralyzed by indecision. The men coming down the hill could not be more than fifty yards away.

“Who are you?” Eric asked.

“A friend, and one who is getting out of here.” He looked from one to the other. “Follow me, or not. It is your choice.” He turned and ran through the trees.

Abby looked at Eric. “To hell with it. Let’s go.”

They took off running after the stranger as the others began closing in from behind. Crashing through the brush and undergrowth, they found themselves running almost straight downhill. Their feet were barely able to keep up with their momentum.

The other men were still coming up from behind. The side of the hill that they were running down was bare. Abby stole a quick glance behind her and saw their pursuers less than fifty feet behind. She let out a little yelp and sped up as fast as she could go, passing Eric.

The tree line began abruptly, and their friend obviously knew precisely where he wanted to go. Over his shoulder, he shouted, “Follow me exactly!”

They entered the thick trees. A few yards in, he took a sharp turn behind a massive boulder and was out of sight for a moment. As Abby flew around the corner, the man's strong hands grabbed her, pulling her back into a cave within the giant rock. He repeated the same with Eric, and then pushed them both back into the darkness. He held his finger to his lips, indicating to be quiet. Twenty seconds later, they heard their pursuers run right past the giant boulder and continue on through the trees.

Their new friend let out a sigh. "Let's go," he said, walking further back into the darkness of the cave.

They looked at each other, unsure what to do. Eric shrugged. "He did just save our ass."

"Who is this guy?"

"I don't know, but I'm willing to find out."

The man stopped and turned to face them. He spoke in a hushed tone. Abby thought she could detect a slight accent, British, or maybe Australian. "My name is Robert. As you so eloquently put it, I did just save your ass. I'm a friend. You do not have to follow me, but in my humble opinion, I believe it is in your best interest to do so." He turned and headed back into the darkness.

Abby thought out loud, "Well, at least he seems to know where he's going." She walked into the darkness at the back of the cave and Eric followed.

They walked for several minutes in the dark, unable to see much of anything. "Right here," Robert said. "Crouch down on your hands and knees. You cannot see it, but we are going to crawl under a

wall of rock. The opening is only two feet tall, so do not pick up your head or you are likely to bump into it.”

They did as they were told. Abby got down on the damp gritty ground and easily slipped her small frame through the opening. The space was not only short, but it was narrow. This caused Eric to have a bit more difficulty fitting through. After some effort he managed to pull his shoulders close enough to his body and squeeze his way through to the other side. Once they were on the other side of the wall, they could see a faint glow in the distance down a long dim corridor. Once they were all on the other side, Robert pivoted a large flat rock over the opening they had just crawled through. “To discourage visitors,” he said.

They walked down the path toward the faint light and came to an open area within the cave. When they walked into the area, the firelight revealed the space. It was like a room, a large round room, maybe twenty feet around. On the far side was an opening about six feet wide, to the outside. Through the opening, Abby could see the moonlight reflecting off of the distant ocean past the tree line.

“Welcome to my home,” he said, smiling.

Abby looked around and saw that it was primitive, but well appointed at the same time. There was a bed of sorts to their right. It looked to be mostly a pile of soft grasses covered with a large piece of canvass. There was a table, and some makeshift chairs on the left. Abby wondered if there were as many people living here, as there were chairs. She looked around but did not see anyone else.

A small indent in the wall seemed to serve as a fireplace. There

was even a beat-up metal teakettle resting on a hook next to it, close enough to keep the water warm. A slow wisp of steam rose from the spout. On another small table there were a few plates, mugs, and kitchen essentials stacked neatly. In the center of the table stood a three-foot-tall stainless steel cylinder with a spout at the bottom; though she could not figure out what purpose it served.

Robert saw her looking at it. "Water purifier. It works by gravity. You just pour a few liters into the top at night, and by morning, the base is filled with fresh, clean water."

"Ah."

"The British Army has been using those things in the field forever"

It was definitely a hint of a British accent Abby had detected.

"So you live here?" Eric asked.

"This is where I call home, yes."

"And where is here, exactly?" Abby asked.

He laughed. "You don't know where you are, do you?"

Abby looked around. "No, no we do not. It might sound funny to you, but we really need to get some answers."

Robert took on a serious look. "Alright, well, this is an island."

"Obviously."

"Let me finish. It is a very small island in the Philippine archipelago. There are roughly seven thousand islands. This particular one does not have a name, I have just always called it home."

Eric and Abby exchanged a confused look.

"My geography is a little rough," Eric said. "How far are we

from Texas?”

Robert laughed. “Oh, pretty far I would say. We are in the South China Sea, a few thousand kilometers south of Japan.” Robert saw the confused look on Eric’s face and translated for the American, “About two thousand miles.”

A bit overwhelmed, Eric sat down on one of the unsteady chairs. “Two thousand miles south of Japan?”

“How did we get here?” Abby wondered aloud, not so much looking for an answer. She just had to put a voice to the thought in her head.

“That I do not know,” Robert said. “I saw you for the first time when you were on the mountaintop earlier. How long have you been here?”

Abby tried to do some math, but was feeling very fuzzy, and a bit faint. “I’m really not sure.” She gave Eric a confused look. “A couple days, I guess.”

He nodded his head in agreement.

Robert was suddenly struck by a thought. “Are the two of you hungry? Would you like something to eat? I’m sure I have something around here.”

“I know I haven’t eaten in a day or so,” Abby said, “but I’m not real hungry.”

Robert took the teakettle and poured some hot water into two mugs, mixing in some dried leaves. He handed them each a mug. “Peppermint tea,” he said.

“You both look awful. Have a drink and get some rest. In the

morning you will have some food, whether you are hungry or not, and I will tell you what little I know. I am going to sit up for awhile and make sure we do not get any visitors.” He looked at Abby and gave her a warm familiar smile, like she was an old friend and he was happy that she had stopped by.

She watched as Robert disappeared out of the opening and into the darkness beyond. Maybe it was his accent, or his soft-spoken voice. Maybe it was the fact that he had just saved her life. Whatever it was, Abby felt very at ease with this man, Robert. He was both familiar and comforting, even though they had just met. She needed precious little encouragement, and lay down on the surprisingly comfortable bed after downing her warm minty tea. Eric finished his and stretched out on the stone floor next to the bed.

“What are you doing?” she asked.

“Getting comfortable.”

“Get up here,” she said, patting the canvass next to her. “There is plenty of room.”

He did not need to be asked twice and quickly settled into a spot next to her. They lay there awake, surrounded by darkness, except for the diminishing glow of the fire. After a long wait, he broke the silence. “Can I ask you something?”

She opened her eyes and looked up at him. “What is it?”

“Where did you learn to be such a bad ass?”

She laughed and put her hand on his chest.

“Seriously, you were something else back there. I didn’t even know what was happening. You took them all down and had us

running in about thirty seconds flat!”

She laughed harder. “I don’t even know.” After a pause, she said, “I don’t seem to recognize myself since I’ve been here.” Abby thought about that as she lay in bed next to Eric. Her small body took up very little space next to him. The only sounds were their breathing and the occasional crack of the embers in the fire.

She had never been a confident person, and certainly never physical. Not physical like what had happened back at the fire anyway. She had always been more of a follower; one to keep her head down in tough situations and let people push her around.

Maybe she was tired of getting pushed around; tired of having her life lived for her. Tired of an endless parade of the wrong people. She wondered if maybe something finally clicked back on the beach when she decided to get her life in order. Apparently she was done with that and was on her way to discovering her inner fighter. She smiled as she started drifting off. *Whatever this place is*, she thought, *I have a feeling that my life will never be the same.*

ABBY HAD SLEPT like the dead, but her stomach woke her in the morning. She stretched and opened her eyes to the smell of food, and to her surprise, coffee. Sitting up, she tried to remember the last time that she ate. Climbing out of bed and looking around, she realized she was alone. She walked over to the fire to check the steaming cast iron pot that was hanging on the hook next to it.

It was some sort of stew of meat, potatoes and carrots. *That will do*, she thought, and scooped herself a bowl, sat down, and just about licked it clean in three minutes flat. Sitting back, she was entirely full. She thought that she should have a bigger appetite, given that it had been awhile since she had anything to eat. Her stomach was not used to having food in it though, so she figured she would take it slow.

She found the source of the inviting aroma calling to her. Staying warm on a flat rock next to the fire was a well-worn metal, percolator-style coffee pot. She remembered her grandfather used one of these on their camping trips when she was a girl. The coffee grounds sat in a basket at the top, the pot resting over the fire until the water boiled and perked up through a tube and back down through the grounds. She remembered thinking that the device was very clever when she was young, being able to make coffee without electricity. She also remembered that it made a strong cup of coffee, or maybe that was just how her grandfather liked it. He used to say that he learned to like coffee when he was in the Navy. He told her

that they had two uses for coffee on the heavy cruiser that he had served on: to wake up in the morning, and to strip paint off the side of the ship.

She poured herself a cup of very black, and what smelled like very strong, coffee. Looking around to find some milk, cream, or sugar, she finally remembered where she was. Straight up black would have to do.

Venturing outside she found Eric sitting on a large stone and taking in the view. The tree line began just far enough down that they could see the blue ocean in the distance. It was gorgeous.

He gave her a big smile, dimples and all. "Mornin'."

"*Good* morning indeed," she said.

He held up his coffee. "Not bad, huh?"

She smiled. "I'll take it."

"How'd you like the rabbit?"

She nearly choked on her coffee. "Rabbit? That was rabbit?"

He was laughing. "Yeah. What did you think it was?"

Nodding her head and smiling, she said, "It was actually the best rabbit I've ever had."

Robert came out of the trees. "She is alive!" He chuckled. "I have never seen anyone sleep quite so soundly."

Abby was a bit startled and did not recognize Robert at first, until she realized that she was seeing him for the first time in the daylight. Last night in the trees and in the cave, he was visible only by the moonlight and dim firelight. His longish hair and short trimmed beard had been obvious in the shadowy light, but otherwise she would

not have recognized him. In the daylight, after a fine rabbit stew and some strong coffee, she finally had a good look at their savior.

He was a tall man, just a bit shorter than Eric, but probably twenty years older. She would guess him to be somewhere in his fifties. His light brown hair hanging just below his ears may have made him look younger, if not for the white hair around his temples and throughout his beard. He had a rugged-yet-distinguished look about him, and given his deep tan, spent a good deal of time outdoors. He walked with confidence when he approached her, and his easy smile dissolved any anxiety she may have had from waking up and remembering her situation. There was only one way to describe his smile. He was genuinely happy to see her, as if meeting up with an old friend.

“Well, I appreciate the bed, and the breakfast. Pretty nice place you have here. Great view, too. What’s your nightly rate?”

“You are welcome to stay as long as you like. It is nice to have company.” He went inside and emerged a few minutes later with a mug of his own, and sat down next to her.

She nudged him with her mug. “So you seem pretty comfortable. How long have you been here?”

“Oh, I have been here for quite awhile,” he said, looking out past the trees, toward the water in the distance.

“How long is quite awhile?”

“I stopped counting after a few years.”

Eric whistled. “Man... and you don’t know how you wound up here either?”

“Oh no, I know exactly how I got here. It was on purpose, not to worry. I had the money, and basically just said I want to get away from everything, and everyone. I had taken holiday at an island a few hours from here and fell in love with the geography.”

“So you bought this island?” she asked.

“No, it is not mine. I made friends with some of the locals and started wondering if I could live on one of these islands. There are literally thousands of them. Would anyone know, or bother to care? The answer was, probably not. So I put together what I needed, the basic stuff you see around here, some seeds, and other essential supplies so I could grow and trap my food. I chartered a boat to drop me off.” He winked at her. “Been here ever since.”

“Well, that’s certainly one way to get away from it all,” Eric observed.

They sat in silence for a bit before Abby said, “Why don’t the boats turn around?”

“What is that?” Robert seemed confused.

“Yesterday, we lit that signal fire. The guy with the beard said he’s lit a bunch of fires, but no one ever turns around, and no one ever comes for help. Why is that?”

Robert thought about it. “Who is to say anyone needs help? If a boat went to the rescue every time they saw smoke coming from one of these seven thousand islands, they would spend all their time hopping from island to island.”

“I guess it makes sense when you put it that way.” Abby paused, “What’s with that guy anyway, or all of them for that matter?”

What's their story?"

"I cannot say that I know, but they certainly do not seem friendly. I have managed to stay out of their way to this point, and I am planning to keep it that way."

"You're tellin' me," Eric said.

"So how do we get off this rock?"

"Yeah," Eric chimed in. "There's another island right over there. Can't be ten miles away."

Abby looked toward where he was pointing. "What's there?" she asked Robert.

"I imagine there are a few folks over there, just like most of these places."

"How do we get there?"

"I suppose you would have to build a boat, or swim, though I would not recommend either. There are some nasty currents around here."

Abby spoke, "So you don't know why we're basically invisible to boats, why there's a maniac tossing sacks over our heads, why we might be here in the first place, what's on the only other piece of land in sight from here, or how we might get there. Is there anything that you do know?"

Robert did not skip a beat. "I know how to survive here. I know that. I have been doing it quite nicely for some time now. This is my home, and you seem like decent people, so I would like to help. But that is about all I can offer you: survival."

Abby thought about that. "Don't you worry about those people

finding you?”

“Not too much. They have not been here all that long, and I know this place better than anyone. Besides, I rarely leave my little enclave, and there are only two ways to get up here. You either have to come in the way we did last night, or you have to scale a bare, twenty-yard cliff face that circles us about a quarter miles out in each direction.” He winked at her, “No one is coming up here to surprise me.”

They spent the afternoon with Robert. He showed them how to find some fruits and other things to eat. They also learned that locating water is easy on this side of the island, given the plentiful streams that flow down the mountainside. He gave Abby a water purification bag. It looked like it was just a clear plastic bag, but he explained it was made of a special material. You fill the bag with water, even salt water, and let it sit in the sun. The material in the bag interacts with the water to purify it, removing toxins, or anything else they should not be drinking.

That evening, they enjoyed a big dinner. Robert grew potatoes, carrots, beans of all kinds, and salad greens. They indulged in it all to their hearts' content. They also enjoyed some fresh rabbit that Robert taught Abby how to trap. She proclaimed it the “second best rabbit I’ve ever had.” Nothing could beat their first real meal in at least three days.

After dinner, they built a fire and sat in silence, enjoying the warm flickering firelight and the view of the setting sun over the island out in the distance. Abby and Eric had been watching the island

on and off all day, hoping to see some signs of life. They had hoped to see some boats in the water, or anything else that might indicate it was a destination worth trying to reach. So far, they had not seen anything.

They sat for hours, enjoying their full stomachs, and the beauty of this place. They were also enjoying a very tasty wine that Robert said he made from wild blackberries growing all over the mountainside. It would never be served in a fine restaurant, but it was very fine for this occasion and their situation. It was fruity and very strong. Abby did not know much about wine, but she liked the warm feeling that the each sip of the deep purple drink gave her. Robert turned in not long after it was completely dark, leaving Abby and Eric on their own.

Eric was looking up. “I don’t remember the last time I saw stars like this.”

Abby admired the sky, as well. “I remember seeing them like this when I was a little girl. Our family used to camp up north. There were no big cities around for a hundred miles. It was beautiful.” She looked at him. He was a handsome man. He had a few days worth of beard growing in. She decided she liked the rugged look.

“Check that out,” he said, almost jumping to his feet. He pointed toward the island out at sea.

Standing, Abby looked into the distance, and there it was – the flickering of lights. Not fires either. These were electric lights. There was a small cluster of them toward one side of the island, and on the other side a larger cluster. Certainly it wasn’t a thriving metropolis,

but there were definitely people over there. At least more people than there were here. Plus they had electricity. She assumed with that came communication with the outside world, and more specifically, a way to get them home.

“That’s where we’re going,” he said, wrapping his arm around her shoulders and pulling her close. She liked the feeling of closeness she had with him as he held her like that. Her mind tried to remember the last time she felt so close to someone. Never mind that she had known him for such a short time.

Abby watched him looking at the island. She admired his optimism; his willingness to try for something that seemed impossible. Maybe it was the very strong homemade wine that she had been drinking, but she also admired the way the fire flickered in his eyes. She stared at him for several minutes, his gaze fixed on the island in the distance. He was no doubt plotting how to get them over there.

She decided to go for it. Standing on the tips of her toes, she leaned up to kiss him. As soon as she did this, her left foot slipped out from under her on the loose rocks, sending her tumbling toward the ground, spilling her drink. Moving quickly and catching her with one arm behind her back, Eric helped her back up to her feet. They locked eyes, and after a beat, she burst out laughing.

“You alright?”

She was laughing so hard, she had tears in her eyes. “Sorry, I think it’s the wine.”

“It’s strong stuff. Good, though. Here, sit down.”

They sat together on the loose earth and leaned back against a

large rock. Abby finally relaxed and laid her head on his warm shoulder. She wondered if she should try to kiss him again. Did he know that was what she was trying to do when she fell? If he did, he did not let on.

She decided not to, and told herself just to enjoy this moment. They sat like that for hours, leaning against each other, enjoying the clear sky and the perfectly fresh air, as the fire slowly died out and she fell asleep against him. He lifted her and carried her back into the cave.

Abby woke up, but pretended she had not. He laid her down on the bed that Robert had left vacant for them. Carefully, he lay down next to her. She shifted and snuggled in close, laying her arm over his chest and drifting off to sleep.

THEY PARTED WAYS with Robert early in the morning after a filling breakfast consisting of biscuits and stew. The stew was the same as it was yesterday. It was delicious considering the circumstance. Robert had made the biscuits from grain he grew on the side of the hill, wild honey, and water. They were dense, grainy, and a bit smoky having been cooked by the fire, but that did not matter. They were sweet and delicious to their starved palates.

He insisted that they take a heaping bag of fresh vegetables from his garden, and all of the leftover biscuits. On his advice, they hiked down the side of the mountain that faced the island in the distance, which was their ultimate destination. He assured them that their former captors had a very permanent camp set up on the other side of the mountain, and should not be a problem for them.

Abby stood on the white sand beach and looked out over the blue water to the island in the distance. Neither one of them had any experience building something that could float. They debated for quite some time what to do about their situation.

“I think it looks closer than it is,” Eric said.

Abby countered, “How far could it possibly be? I went to St. Thomas over Spring break a couple years ago. The island next door was four miles away and only took about 20 minutes to get to on a boat. This one doesn’t look much further than that one did.”

“I’ll tell you, it’s a lot further than four miles. Two or three

times that at least. Plus we don't have a boat or anything to build a sail with, for that matter. We'll be paddling the whole way, so I'd forget about that twenty minutes."

"Obviously. But you agree though, right? Let's go for it?"

"What's our option? Hang out here? I'd rather not spend the rest of my life waiting for some crazy guy with a beard to snatch us up again."

"Agreed."

They decided they would build the smallest raft they could. Something they could sit on comfortably, but be big enough to lie on if they had to rest. Abby would construct a couple of paddles, and they would go for it. They were already tired from the hike that morning, and still had to gather wood and vines before trying to lash together something that would float. They were not getting anywhere today. In all likelihood, they were stuck here at least for a couple more days.

Eric went hunting for wood to build their raft with, while Abby worked on constructing a simple shelter for them. Abby was hesitant about splitting up, but Eric reminded her that Robert said they would be OK on this side of the island, and he promised not to wander too far. Reluctantly she watched him walk out into the trees. She got right to work on making their shelter using branches and materials from the trees right at the forest edge, hoping the distraction would ease her uncertainty.

After a handful of failed attempts, she finally got a support log to hold in the crook of a tall tree that had split into a Y shape. She

used vines to lash the large support log into place, and then began laying smaller branches against it for the walls of a lean-to shelter. The blue skies did not look like rain, but she piled so many branches and leaves on top of their little shelter that it looked as though it could withstand a monsoon and keep them dry inside.

Abby did not have the benefit of a watch, but the entire process must have taken a couple of hours. She had become so wrapped up in it that she had forgotten where Eric was. She wondered what was taking him so long and thought about going to look for him, but figured she would give it just a little while longer. No doubt she would find him and he would poke fun at her for being worried.

She gathered some rocks and made a little fire pit near the entrance. Afterward, she collected some wood and kindling to build a fire later and keep them warm overnight. While she did not have a way to tell the time, the sun was getting low, and she was approaching full-blown panic over the fact that Eric had yet to return. It had been at least four hours since she had started on the shelter, and she had not seen any sign of him.

Going into the trees a few dozen yards, she took a big drink of water and refilled the solar bag purifier Robert had given them. She looked around, standing perfectly still, listening to the sounds around her. She did not hear any indication that Eric was nearby.

She went back to their makeshift camp, set the solar bag in the sun, and checked that her knife was securely strapped to her right thigh. Thoughts of Eric being snatched again played through her mind. They never discussed how long he would be gone, but it had

been most of the afternoon by now. After pacing the beach for a while, she could not stand to wait any longer. The sun would be going down in the next couple of hours. She had to go look for him.

Going into the trees, Abby was tempted to call out for him, but she abandoned that idea when she remembered that there could be other people out there – people she did not want to run into. She worked her way back in the direction that they had come from when they had hiked down the mountain that morning. She figured that would make the most sense. If he followed that route, it would give him some sort of bearing on how to find his way back. That is what she would have done anyway.

She spent the better part of the next hour searching in vain. Every ten yards or so, she would stop and listen for him. Every rustling leaf or snapping twig made her jump. She continued like this for nearly an hour. The deeper she went into the trees, the less light there was filtering through, and the more on edge her nerves became. Finally, she removed her knife from its sheath. She continued forward with the knife held by her side, ready to strike.

Eventually she had made her way several miles through the trees, with no sign of Eric. On the way, she had done a great deal of stopping and starting. If she were to walk back at a normal pace, without stopping, she could be back to their camp before sundown. After convincing herself that Eric would be at the camp waiting for her and worried that she was gone, she decided to head back. There was no sense in being out here, lost in the dark, looking for him. If he was not there when she got back, she would wait it out overnight and

hike back up the mountain at dawn to enlist Robert's assistance in the search.

"I won't have to do that," she told herself aloud. "He's going to be waiting for me when I get back."

A woman's voice came from just behind her. "Who's that?"

Abby nearly jumped out of her skin. She spun, and held her knife straight out. Standing ten feet away was a dirty, but beautiful, young woman. Abby immediately looked at her hands. They were empty. As she looked up toward the woman's face, she could not decide what was more striking – how great her thick blond hair looked for being in the middle of nowhere, or her sky blue eyes.

"Who are you?" Abby demanded.

The woman held up her empty hands to emphasize that she meant to harm. "It's OK," she tried to reassure Abby.

Locking eyes, they sized each other up for several uncomfortable moments, until Abby turned and ran. Assuming there were others around, she was not about to stand there and wait to have a bag thrown over her head again.

The woman called after her, "Wait!"

Abby never broke stride, sprinting through the trees on the narrow path. She could hear the woman trying to keep pace behind her, but Abby was sure that she was the faster of the two. Continually scanning the trees ahead, she anticipated that someone else would jump out. She ran like this for ten minutes, flat out, dodging trees and ducking lowlying branches. The woman was still calling after her. By

the sound of her voice, Abby could tell that she was tired and falling behind.

Glancing over her shoulder, she confirmed that the woman was quite far behind. Also, it seemed that they were alone, as there had been no sign of any of the others. Surely she would not have made it this far if any of them were around. Abby ducked behind a thick growth of ferns and pushed her hair out of her face, breathing heavily. She waited half a minute until the woman came jogging by. Jumping from her hiding place, she grabbed the woman by her thick hair and held the knife to her throat.

The woman pleaded, "It's OK, it's OK. I'm not here to hurt you."

"OK, my ass," Abby said. "Where are the rest of your people?"

"My people?"

"Yes, your people. The band of assholes that snatched us up a few days ago. Those people."

The woman tried to nod, but Abby held her hair tight. "You must have run into Tom. That sounds like him."

Abby studied the profile of the woman's face. She did not recognize her as one of the women by the fire, but she had to assume that there were more of them than she had seen that night. "So you know this guy?"

The woman allowed herself a smile. "You could say that."

"So who the hell are you, and how do you know him?"

The woman swallowed hard. "My name is Sara. Would you mind putting that knife down?"

“Actually, I would.”

“You’re new here.”

“How can you tell?”

“You have been here probably four or five days, no?”

Abby furrowed her brow. “Yes, about five days, I think.”

“Well, for one, your clothes are still in one piece. That, and your hair is greasy.”

“There seems to be a shortage of showers around here,” Abby said wryly.

“Don’t worry. Give it another month and you won’t believe how good it looks.” Sara could see Abby was confused. “When you wash your hair all the time, you strip out the natural oils, so you produce extra to compensate for that. If you don’t wash your hair for a few days, it gets to look greasy. After a few weeks though, you’ll stop overproducing those natural oils, and your hair will look amazing.” Sara gave her a big smile, trying to relax, despite the knife against her throat. “Trust me.”

Her blond hair is gorgeous, Abby thought, *so maybe she was onto something there*. But it was going to take more than a beauty tip to win her over. “How long have you been here?”

“Eight or nine months I figure.”

Abby relaxed a bit and lowered the knife slightly.

Sara went on. “When you got here a few days ago, you woke up and had no idea where you were or how you got here. You have been noticing changes in yourself. You feel healthier or stronger than you should. There was also a man with you, about your age. You

found each other within a few minutes of waking up. He also has no idea where this is, or how he came to be here.”

Tightening her grip, Abby pressed the blade against her flesh. “How do you know that? Where is he?”

Sara smiled innocently. “I know because that’s exactly what happened to me.”

Abby’s heart sank. “What? Really?”

“Really.”

“What about...” She thought for a minute. “Tom?”

Sara barely nodded, trying not to move with the knife pressed to her neck.

“What about him and his people?”

She let out a breath. “He is out of his mind, and so are the rest of them.” She paused. “Will you please relax with the knife? I’m not here to hurt you, but you’re starting to hurt me.”

The knife had been pressed flat against Sara’s throat. Had Abby tilted the knife on an angle, or Sara made a sudden move, it would slice through her jugular without difficulty. Abby relaxed the pressure and lowered the knife, keeping it ready in her hand by her side. “Tell me about them.”

“Thanks,” Sara said, her eyes moving from the knife to meet Abby’s eyes.

“Was Tom the man you woke up next to on the island?”

“No. When we got here, Tom was already here. He said that he had been here a few months and would take care of us.” She shook her head.

“Who is we?” Abby asked, “You said when we got here.”

“Randy, the guy who arrived here with me. When we got here, Tom was already here. He seemed a little odd, but he knew his way around, so we followed his lead. Anyway, some things went on that I was not OK with, but Randy was all in with whatever Tom was up to. I decided I’d rather be on my own, so I took off one night, and I’ve managed to avoid them since.” She shrugged her shoulders, “So here we are.”

Abby studied her face. She was filthy, but you could see that she had beautiful features. What were left of her clothes did not do much to cover up her lean body. If she had a weapon on her, it had to be hidden some place very uncomfortable. Her shorts looked like they used to be pants, but were torn off near the top of her thighs, and she donned a tight tank top that clung to her sweat-soaked skin, though it was so tight that it probably would cling to her regardless.

Abby’s eyes came back to her face. There were two women sitting around the fire with Tom the night she and Eric had been taken. One had her face slashed with the knife, the other one took off pretty quickly. The only thing Abby could remember about her was her fire-red hair. Sara was neither of them.

“Listen,” Sara said, “you don’t have to believe me, but whatever the reason is that we are here, we are in the same crappy situation. I haven’t spoken to another person in months. I saw you. I know you’re not one of them. I figured we might be able to help each other out, that’s all. If you are not interested, fine. I’ll turn around and head back to where I came from – just as soon as you promise that

knife is going to stay right where it is.”

Abby looked at her knife and slid it back into its sheath.

“Fine.”

Sara smiled and breathed a sigh of relief. She opened her arms and took a step toward Abby, who held her hand up to stop her.

“Turn around,” Abby ordered. “We won’t bother you, if you don’t bother us, OK?”

Sara just stood, staring at her. Her blue eyes glazed over, and a tear streamed down her cheek. She stood staring at Abby for another moment, as if she hoped Abby would say something more, before turning around and walking back into the trees.

Abby watched her walk away for a few seconds, and then broke into a run after her.

ABBY SHOUTED, "Wait!"

Sara stopped and stood standing with her back to Abby.

"I'm looking for the man who came here with me. His name is Eric. Have you seen him out here?"

Sara shook her head no, without turning around.

"I'm sorry," Abby said. "I'm heading back to our camp now. We have some food there. Are you hungry?"

Sara turned around. "I've been hungry for eight months," she said with a desperate smile.

Abby stared at her while she thought silently. Sara seemed sincere. She did not fight back when Abby could have easily killed her. Most important, Sara was willing to walk away. Abby thought she seemed genuinely lonely and pathetic, and her heart went out to her, "Come on."

As they walked back to camp, they continued looking for Eric without any luck. Abby thought that it was nice to have some company out here. While she was keeping an eye on Sara, looking for any signs that she should not trust her, she was warming up to her. Abby was certainly less nervous than she had been on the walk into the forest. Maybe they could build a slightly bigger raft and bring Sara with them. She figured it would not hurt to have an extra set of arms to paddle. She decided that she would have to talk to Eric about it.

They arrived back at camp to find Eric waiting for them, though he was shocked by Sara's presence. "What's this?"

"This is Sara. She's going to stay with us for a bit. Where were you anyway?"

"I've been combing the trees around this whole area to make sure none of them are here," he said, pointing at Sara. "What are you talking about, stay with us? Who is she? Is she one of them?"

"Relax, she's not one of them. We can trust her."

"How do you know that?"

Abby explained how they had met up in the trees when she was out looking for Eric. She told him her story, and that she knew about Tom and had been hiding from him for months on her own.

Eric looked their guest up and down, skepticism showed on his face. "I'm not buying it. How did you find us?"

Sara opened her mouth to speak, but Abby spoke for her. She already felt bad about putting Sara through the third degree when they met up. "I told you Eric, we went through this already. I grilled the hell out of her with my knife to her throat. She's OK. I could have killed her and she never fought back. Trust me. Let's just relax and talk it out." She waited for his response and got none, "How about we have something to eat."

"You go ahead," he said, "I don't have much of an appetite." He walked away, watching the sun set over the water.

Sara and Abby were silent, though Abby could tell that Sara was in deep thought. She looked troubled. "Don't worry about him," Abby assured her, "I'll talk to him again. He's just being protective."

We've been through a lot."

"Abby, I appreciate you taking me in. I've been lonely and hungry for months, but I don't want to cause trouble between you two," Sara said. "Maybe I should just go for now and let him cool off?"

"No, stay here. I'll talk to him."

Abby walked out onto the beach with Eric. He was standing on the wet sand at the edge of the water, letting the small waves lap his feet. He gazed out toward the sun that was setting behind the island in the distance. From behind him she rested her small hands on his large shoulders.

"I'm sorry," he said. "After the other night, I'm just having a hard time believing that this random woman finding us is a coincidence."

"We met in the woods, while I was out looking for you. I sent her away, and she was willing to go. That's when I knew she wasn't lying. I figured maybe we could help each other out. If we're going to paddle however far it is to that island over there, an extra set of arms would be helpful, don't you think?"

Eric thought about that. "She will be extra weight, too."

"I really think she's alright. She seems lonely and desperate. She never even tried to put up a fight when I easily could have sliced her throat. But if you don't trust me on this, then we'll just send her away and do our own thing."

"I trust you. I don't know, though. I'm keeping an eye on her."

Walking back toward their camp, Abby said over her shoulder,

“Just be nice and come have something to eat.”

Eventually he made his way back and they sat down together, Abby and Sara shared stories about their lives before they got to the island. Eric just sat and had a few bites and watched them talk. He did not join in the conversation.

She certainly is beautiful, Eric thought. Sara reminded him of a whole bunch of blond-haired, blue-eyed Texas girls he had known. That did not mean she was worth his trust, though. She and Abby seem to have hit it off rather quickly. He figured women were just like that. They needed someone to talk to beside a guy.

Something about her was just not sitting right with him. Abby had said that she seemed genuine, and that when she told her to take a hike, she was willing to leave. Maybe she should have let her walk. That would have been a real test.

He decided to go along with Abby for now, but he would keep a close eye on their new companion. When he met Abby on the beach, he had a good feeling. He felt at home with her almost instantly. He thought it was very strange at the time, but then he had the same gut feeling the other night when they ran into Robert in the trees, the night that he helped them hide from Tom's people. He did not have the same feeling about Sara. He was feeling that he should keep her at arm's length, a feeling he could not shake.

After a night spent trying to sleep without much success, Eric

spent the next morning dragging wood to the beach for their raft. He had to rely on trees that had already fallen, given that they had no way to cut anything down. The tricky part was finding enough that were the same length, or close enough. For the vines to lash the raft together, he decided to cut some fresh using Abby's knife. They were much more flexible and less likely to break apart than the dry vines he was finding on the ground.

Abby and Sara were on paddle duty, which was somehow more tedious than hauling logs. They attached the paddles to the ends of straight, strong branches. The paddles were constructed of dozens of palm leaves that they layered and wove together to make a scoop that they figured would make a good paddle. Sara, in her time on the island, had taught herself how to weave these leaves together to make baskets to store fruits and supplies at her camp. They just adapted the shape and made them stronger. Abby smiled at the thought that their friendship had already proven very useful.

"I'm going to take a break and go refill our water," Abby announced. "Want to come?"

"No, I'll stay here."

"Alright, I'll be back in a bit." Abby grabbed the mostly empty water bag and walked off into the trees. The bag could purify salt water too, but she had found that the fresh stream water tasted better and purified faster than the salt water. The salt water option would have to do once they launched their raft, but as long as she had the clear fresh water from the stream nearby she decided she would use that.

She thought about their new friend, Sara. She was definitely not the kind of girl that would be her friend in another life, but right here and now, it made sense, given their situation. She was very pretty. She was exceptionally skinny now, but Abby pictured her with another ten or fifteen pounds on her and she became a knock out.

As skinny as she was, her chest certainly had not suffered. The skintight tank top definitely did not do anything to hide her assets. Abby assumed they were implants. It would explain why they hadn't shrunk along with the rest of her body. Looking down, Abby was thankful she was well enough endowed that she had never considered it for herself.

It was not that she was not friends with pretty girls. It was just that Sara did not strike Abby as the type of person who would give her the time of day had they not been trapped on an island together.

After refilling their water bag, she hurried back to the camp. Eric had been dragging wood all morning, and had never so much even come over for a sip. The thought of him put a little extra spring in her step. He was another one that she probably never would have associated with if not for their current situation.

He was handsome, and very sweet. He was genuinely concerned for her, even though they had only known each other for a short time. Of course, she thought, she would never have fallen for him in her world. *He is too good.* She mentally ticked down the list of the men that she had let into her life. By and large, they were all bad choices. She could not think of a single one of them she would want to be stuck here with.

No, Eric was a great guy. She decided that it was time she should do something about it, too. She remembered what a miserable failure trying to kiss him the other night had been. She was not going to let that be the moment she let him get away. No, that would be a minor hiccup in their otherwise fantastical story.

At least that was what she thought until she got back to the beach to find Sara off “helping” him with the raft. Abby watched from the edge of the trees. If he had not noticed the full breasts barely concealed in her tank top before now, there was no way he did not notice them at this point. Abby watched in disgust as Sara leaned over in front of him, practically hitting him in the face with them.

Abby was too far away to hear what they were talking about. Eric was not doing much talking, but whenever he opened his mouth, Sara laughed and touched his shoulder. Abby kicked herself for not kissing him when she had the chance. Who is this woman she brought into their little circle, and forced him to be nice to? She could just about slap herself across the face.

No, she thought, *relax. He’s not buying into it.* Abby could tell from fifty yards away that Sara was laying it on thick and sending out all the right signals. At the same time, she could tell that Eric was not into it. There was no way he could be missing what she was putting out there, but Eric was focused entirely on the raft.

Abby smiled. *He’s not into Sara, he’s into me.*

What kind of person does that? She comes into my camp and starts making a move on my guy? She laughed to herself. No fighting it now. She was referring to him as “my guy.” What does she know about this

woman? Her story seemed believable. What sold her was how genuine she seemed. Her heart had gone out to her. Sara was so lonely and vulnerable. She certainly did not seem that way now, prancing around the beach like a puppy, a cute little puppy, begging for attention.

Eric saw Abby at the edge of the trees and waved. Sara's demeanor instantly changed. Abby waved back and held up the water bag, and Eric trotted over to her, with Sara bringing up the rear.

"Thanks," Eric said, gulping down close to a full liter.

Abby turned to Sara. "Give up on the paddles?"

"No," she said, smiling, "just taking a break. This guy looked like he could use a hand."

"I'm sure he did." Abby turned to go back to her weaving.

Eric shrugged, "I'm gonna get back to it. If I can finish this afternoon, we can talk about heading out for a test run tomorrow morning."

"Sounds great!" Abby said.

After Eric had left them alone, Sara spoke up. "What's that supposed to mean, 'I'm sure he did?'"

Abby looked at her and rolled her eyes, "I saw you out there, and you were obviously flirting with him."

"So what if I was? He is a handsome man, and we're on an island without much to do." Sara smiled at Abby, who did not look up. Her smile quickly dissipated, "Oh my, are you two a thing?"

Abby laughed, "No, we are not a 'thing.'"

"Then what's the problem?"

"Maybe I want to be a thing."

“Then why aren’t you?”

Abby sighed. “I don’t know. I always wind up with the wrong guys, and he’s so sweet. I just don’t want to screw it up.”

“Well, if that’s what you want, don’t let me stop you.”

“Thanks,” Abby laughed, “I don’t think I could compete with you anyway, at least with those,” she said, gesturing to her chest.

“Life is a competition sweetheart, especially here.”

Abby wondered exactly what she meant by that. They sat in silence weaving, strengthening and lashing, until they had four good solid oars. They figured it would be best to bring a couple extra. If they somehow lost one out there, it was going to be a long way to land being down a paddle.

Abby nodded in approval. “I think this just might work.”

Sara seemed doubtful.

“What? If our test run goes well in the morning, as long as the thing floats, we could be over there by tomorrow night!”

“We’ll see.”

Abby looked out and saw Eric heading toward them again. He was moving slowly, obviously exhausted, but the fact that he was coming over must mean he was done, too.

Abby turned to Sara. “Do you have anything at your camp that you need? That you want to bring with you? You should go before it gets dark.”

“Trying to get rid of me?”

Abby laughed, but Sara was not smiling. “No, I’m just saying, we don’t want to get held up any longer than we need to tomorrow, so

you should get your things.”

“I don’t have things,” she raised her voice. “I have all the things I need with me.”

“That’s for sure,” Abby said, raising an eyebrow at her chest.

Sara took a step toward her as Eric arrived, “Hey,” he said, “what’s going on here?”

The two women were silent, and didn’t take their eyes off each other.

“Can’t you girls play nice?” he said, laughing.

Sara looked at him. “Apparently not.” She turned and stormed off into the trees.

“What was that about?”

“You don’t want to know,” Abby said.

“Well, I might want to know.” He looked at Sara walking away from the camp. “Is she still coming with us?”

“Why? Would you like that? You want her to come with us? Yesterday you didn’t want anything to do with her. Why the sudden change of heart, huh?” She poked him in the chest.

“Whoa, what are you talking about? She seems nice, and you’re the one who said to give her a chance.”

She stared him straight in the eye, trying to read his mind.

“Asshole,” she said, running off into the trees after Sara.

HOW COULD she have disappeared so quickly? Abby was trying to track Sara through the trees without being noticed. The problem was, she was not noticing Sara either. Wherever she had gone, she had gone quickly.

Abby followed along the trail where they had met yesterday at just about this time. When she arrived at the very spot where they had met, she stopped to look around. Yesterday, Sara had been off on the side of the trail, and somewhat hidden in the trees. Without having any other sort of guidance, Abby figured that would be the best way to continue her search. Going off the trail, she started looking for any type of clue that indicated Sara had gone back this way.

After wandering for quite some time, Abby was beginning to accept the fact that she was out of luck. The sun was getting lower in the sky and would be setting sometime in the next hour. She figured that as long as she headed toward the beach before the sun completely set, she could find her way back.

She did not want to call off her search, but she only had a few more minutes to pick through the brush before she would be forced to turn and head back. Sara either did not want to be found, or... what? She clearly did not want to be found. *That's probably for the best*, Abby thought.

She felt bad leaving her here while they fled the island. At the same time, Sara may be an entirely different person than Abby first

thought. The way she reacted back at camp was not what Abby expected. Then again, how can you know what to expect from someone you have barely known for a day?

In the distance, there was a slight clearing in the trees, and Abby saw something on the ground, a white cloth maybe. Walking to the edge of the trees that surrounded the clearing, she squinted her eyes to see. It was Sara's tank top! If her shirt was on the ground, where was she?

Abby reached her right hand down and wrapped her fingers around the handle of her knife, drawing it from the sheath. Closing her eyes, she listened and heard nothing. Dead silence. No sounds of struggle, or someone being dragged through the trees. She had not, and still did not, hear any screaming – muffled or otherwise.

With knife in hand, she stepped back several paces, and slowly circled around the clearing. Masked by the trees, she stepped carefully, not making a sound, scanning the ground for any clues. She was not sure what she would find, but maybe there would be some sign of the direction where Sara was taken.

Abby thought about watching Sara flirt with Eric on the beach. The woman certainly liked attention, but Abby could not imagine that she would just strip her shirt and leave it on the ground to go prancing through the woods. Someone else, or perhaps several others, must have grabbed her. It appeared that Sara's luck in avoiding her old friends had run out.

She completed a full circle back to where she had started. There was no sign of what might have happened to Sara. She found no

blood-smeared leaves, no freshly broken branches, or other articles of clothing. After having circled the entire area, she was sure that there was no one else around, but going out into the open clearing made her nervous nonetheless. Abby weighed her options. It was getting late at this point, and the sun was getting low. If she did not head back in the next few minutes, she was not sure she would be able to find her way.

Abby decided that she would run into the clearing, grab the shirt, and run back to the trees to head straight back toward the beach. It would not take her thirty seconds. She secured her knife and had one last look around. "Out, back, home." She repeated to herself over and over.

She ran faster than she would have imagined. Closing the distance quickly, something flashed ahead, and looking up she was shocked to see Sara standing at the edge of the trees. Just as she started to slow her pace, Abby stepped onto a patch of dry grass that immediately gave way under her feet, sending her flailing forward. She hit the ground in front of her and crashed through, falling ten feet down and landing with a thud that knocked the wind out of her.

Rolling over, she looked up and saw the opening that she had just fallen through. Sara was standing at the edge and putting her top back on. "Sorry, sweetie, it had to be done. Get comfortable. I'll be back soon." With that, she was gone.

Abby sat up and flexed her right shoulder, which had absorbed most of the impact. There were fallen branches all around her, and a ton of dried grass that had apparently been piled on top of the branches to conceal the hole she had fallen into. This was not

something Sara had just set up in haste. No, this was here waiting. This was planned.

Anger set in before panic. She screamed at the top of her lungs. How could she have been tricked so easily? She listened and heard nothing but the sounds of nature around her. What did she say? ‘Get comfortable?’ Abby realized that Sara must be alone out there, but probably not for long. She is going to get the others.

Abby decided that she was not going to wait around for them to get back. She tried jumping up and grabbing the top, but it was far too high over her head. Even her fingertips would not reach the height of the edge. She tried to climb the sides of the hole, but the dirt was loose and the wall crumbled in her hands as she tried to climb.

Looking around, she found nothing of use at her disposal. She plopped down on the ground and thought about how she was going to get out of this. There were some very large branches over the top of the hole, which had served to support the smaller branches and grasses that had been covering it. If she could get one of those down, she could prop it against the side and try to climb it to the top.

At first she tried jumping and hitting them, but they were too high. She tried poking at them and hitting them with the smaller branches, but they did not budge. They must have been secured somehow at the ground level. She took a slightly larger stick, maybe two inches in diameter and a couple feet long, and pushed hard against the branches overhead. She got the same result. In anger, she took the stick that she was holding, threw it at the wall, and began pacing like a caged tiger.

Abby looked at the stick that she had thrown, and saw that it had momentarily pierced the soft dirt wall before it fell. That gave her an idea. She took out her knife and quickly sharpened one end of the stick to a point and thrust it into the dirt wall. It easily sunk into the dirt five or six inches before stopping. She took a large stone and hammered at the back end of the stick until it sunk in further and was tough to wiggle with her hand. Then she tested it. It had a little give, but for the most part it held firm.

Abby looked up. It must be ten feet to the top, and she stood just over five feet tall. She looked around the floor and grabbed several more sticks that were similar in length and width. As fast as she could work, she sharpened the ends, and thrust them into the wall, one over the other. She soon had five sticks pounded into the wall at one-foot intervals as high as her arms could reach.

She stashed her knife and began climbing. The bottom one came loose and her foot slipped right away. She realized she had to keep her feet very close to the wall and not put so much pressure on the far end of the sticks. She stuck it back in and tried again with success for a few steps. Once she reached the top stick, she stood holding on, realizing she had nothing above her to grab and continue her ascent.

Grasping her knife, she sank the blade into the wall, giving her a handhold. She continued this way until she was standing on the top stick and her arms could reach the lip of the hole. She latched onto one of the secured logs at the top, and tried to pull herself up. Her feet slipped off of the stick, leaving her dangling in the air and clinging to

the log. Swinging her feet to catch the edge of the hole, she carefully maneuvered herself out and up, onto the ground.

Panting, both from the physical exertion and adrenaline, she knelt in the clearing for a few minutes to compose herself. As she stood up, she heard the rustling of branches about ten feet to her right. Coming out of the trees was Sara, looking shocked.

“You bitch!” Abby yelled at her. Without thinking that Sara had likely returned with some of the others, she charged at her. Abby made it three steps before a large stone clubbed her on the back of the head and her world went black.

ABBY COULD HEAR unfamiliar voices all around her. Her head was spinning, and pain radiated from the back of her head. With her eyes closed, she would guess that it was dark, or at least that she was in a dark place, as no light filtered through her eyelids. She felt as though it would be painful to open her eyes despite the lack of light, so she lay there with them closed for the moment, trying to get her bearings.

She struggled to concentrate through the fog of pain and dizziness. There were voices, but she could not make them out. She tried to relax and focus, and will her mind to get in gear. The voices began to come into focus after a few minutes. She could hear Tom and the background murmurs of his followers. Then she heard Sara speak and her blood began to boil.

She did not dare move. She could tell that she was laid out on a semi-soft and uneven surface, probably right on the ground. She wriggled her hands and feet to confirm she was bound. Rubbing her wrists back and forth, she realized that she was bound much tighter than the last time. As she lay there, she focused her mind on her right leg. *Is the knife still there?* She could not tell. Moving very slowly, she shifted her leg and pressed the side of it into the ground to see if she could feel the scabbard still attached to her thigh. She felt nothing. Her leg was bare.

The voices were too far away for her to understand, and they

began to fade after awhile. She had not opened her eyes yet, but she did not feel like she was alone. For one, she had to assume they had learned a lesson and would not leave her unattended. Aside from that, she *felt* as though someone else was there. She could not explain it, but she definitely felt it. Once the voices faded to the point that they were barely audible, she thought about opening her eyes. Just as she was about to, she heard the sound of footsteps padding on the dirt nearby. She kept her eyes closed, trying to appear passed out.

It was a man. That much she was sure of. The steps were too heavy for a woman. It smelled like a man, too. It smelled like a man who had not bathed in quite some time. He was so close now she could listen to him breathing. Her eyes were still closed, and from what she could tell, her head was facing away from him.

It was all she could do not to jump when he touched her shoulder. Had he not done it so delicately, she probably would have screamed. He shook her very gently, as if he did not want her to wake up. She thought about opening her eyes to see who it was. Could Eric have found her? No, she knew it was not Eric. The heavy gait was not his, and he did not smell like this. No, it had to be one of them.

He gently shook her again. She just let her head hang to the side and tried to will him away. If she were unconscious, he would leave her alone. At least that is what she thought, until she felt his breath on her neck and his hand slide under her tank top. Her mind raced. She was bound and laying on the ground. There were not a lot of options.

His breathing sped up as he massaged her breast under her

shirt. Abby was overcome by helplessness, and anger. *What can I do?* If she screamed or fought, the others would come running. She could sense his excitement increasing as he rapidly breathed near her ear. Deep in her gut, she hated herself for allowing this to happen. Suddenly, her thoughts came into focus. The helplessness. The abuse. Even the fact that she was tied up. For a split second, everything was clear as two words screamed from the back of her mind, “Never again!”

In a flash, she snapped her head right and slammed her face into him, sinking her teeth into his cheek. She was like a wounded animal, lashing out however she could. He screamed as he pulled away, leaving a chunk of his flesh behind, which she spit at him in disgust. She rolled onto her knees and launched herself forward, slamming her forehead into his crotch with astonishing force, making herself dizzy from the impact. The man bawled in pain before dropping to the ground where he began vomiting.

Abby was in a state of shock herself, not knowing what in the world possessed her to do that. She spit blood from her mouth and took a quick assessment of her surroundings. Her eyes struggled to focus. Her head spun, if not from being assaulted earlier, then from her head on collision with this man’s crotch, she couldn’t tell which. There were no weapons of any kind. She saw nothing but trees all around. She sat and contorted her arms to loop under her feet so that her hands would at least be in front of her. Grabbing a stone with a dull edge, she furiously rubbed the vine that bound her feet and freed them. There was no time to worry about her hands. She heard the

voices returning. They were approaching fast. The others must have heard him scream.

She took off at a sprint into the trees, but was barely past the tree line when Sara tackled her from behind. The two of them fell to the ground in a heap.

“You just don’t quit, do you?” Sara was breathing hard.

Abby said nothing.

The others surrounded them within seconds. They yanked her to her feet and dragged her back. A very large man held her arms like his hands were grappling hooks, digging his fingers into her skin. She winced from the pain and struggled to keep her feet under her. She thrashed back and forth trying to free herself from his vice-like grip. When her right arm came loose, Sara grabbed a fistful of her hair, close to her scalp, and made a tight fist. Abby screamed and stopped struggling, as Sara dragged her by her hair back to the camp.

One of the women was checking on the man who had been enjoying himself until Abby had put an end his fun. He was still in a great deal of pain. He had stopped vomiting, but looked as though he might again at any moment. He sat holding his crotch, rocking back and forth like a child. Blood trickled from the wound on his cheek.

Sara threw Abby down to the ground. “She’s the tough one,” she said. “Like I was telling you, the guy, Eric, he basically just follows her around. She’s definitely the one in charge.”

Abby looked up. “One in charge?”

Tom laughed, smiling through his beard. “You can drop the act. We know why you’re here.”

Abby looked confused.

“Oh, don’t play dumb,” he said. “I know who sent you. You are good, I’ll give you that. But I’m not going down without a fight.”

Abby just shook her head. “I have no idea what you’re talking about.”

Sara spoke up. “Let me go back to their camp and take care of Eric.” She looked at Abby and smiled. “I know he won’t be a problem without you around.”

“Take care of him?” Abby asked.

“Kill him,” Tom said definitively. “Then you, once he’s out of the way. I figure we’ll hold onto you for now. Just in case.”

“Why the hell...” Abby was dumbfounded. “We don’t want anything to do with you people. We are trying to get out of here!”

Tom looked smug. “Of course you are! Now that you know it’s not going to be so easy to take us out. Listen, we know this island, we know what you’re trying to do, and it’s not going to happen.”

Sara locked eyes with Abby. “Don’t worry. I’ll make it quick. He won’t suffer.”

Abby struggled against her binds, but the others held her down.

Sara laughed. “You know, I almost feel a little bad. You never got to tell him how you feel, did you? And now he’s back there, all alone, wondering where you went. That poor, handsome man. All alone.” She ran a finger down the center of Abby’s chest. “Don’t worry, honey, I’ll comfort him. Hell, I’ll even screw him. Right before I kill him.”

“Bitch!” Abby yelled. “What is wrong with you people? Just leave us alone!”

She thrashed against her binds, knocking over the woman who was holding her. The man gripping Abby from other side held tighter. Tom pushed Sara out of the way and backhanded Abby with such force that her world spun around.

She shook her head. When her eyes came back into focus, she was looking into the trees behind Tom. She saw something, or someone. Her eyes went in and out of focus, and she wondered how much more head trauma she could withstand and still see straight. She decided that head-butting the man in the crotch was a poorly thought out plan. She concentrated hard, trying to focus her eyes. It looked like there was a man in the trees. She closed her eyes and purposefully slowed her breathing. When she opened them again, she could make out the clear outline of the man.

It was Eric. The firelight was flickering and reflecting back in his eyes. Taking another deep breath, she stopped struggling.

Eric was happy to find them, not that it was all that hard. They made more than enough noise on an otherwise quiet island. He saw Tom backhand Abby and nearly leapt from the cover of the trees then and there to charge him. He took two steps before the thought occurred to him that it was a bad idea. There were six of them, against Abby and Eric. While he had learned that Abby was quite the little fighter, she was tied and beaten. If he rushed from the trees, he would no doubt find himself in the same predicament, and that would be of

no use to anyone.

He crouched down and waited. Abby was facing him, and he thought he saw her catch a glimpse of him for a second. Maybe she did, or maybe it was his imagination. He liked the idea that she saw him. He wanted her to know she was not alone. She was a tough one, but in her current situation, she was probably a little worried inside.

Most of the others had their backs to him. There was the redheaded woman standing next to Abby, also facing him, but looking at Tom, not the trees. The three men looked tough. Eric was strong, but he knew better than to take on the whole group by himself. He settled in to wait. Eventually they would split up or got to sleep, and that was when he would make his move.

Seeing Abby like this made him furious. It was obvious that he had been right about Sara, but it was not time for gloating. He was disappointed. He felt as though he had failed to protect her. He chuckled a bit to himself. The thought that Abby was someone who needed protecting was funny, considering how well she handled herself. Even so, right now she needed his help.

It turned out that he did not have to wait all that long for the group to split up.

Sara had been doing most of the talking for the last few minutes. He could not make out what she was saying, but she was very excited. They all seemed to have reached an agreement on something. Tom and Sara went off to the right, back in the direction Eric had come from. A few minutes later the man who had been sitting on the ground in some kind of pain stood up to stretch and walk around a bit before

he and the other big guy headed off to the left, through the trees, and out of sight. That left two women watching Abby – the two they had already faced and beaten.

It was time to make a move. Eric thought about rushing in to take care of the two women and free Abby, but he could not reconcile the thought of hurting a woman, even if they might deserve it. He also doubted that he could do it quietly. There would be screaming, then the men would come running back from wherever they were. He figured Tom and Sara were in all likelihood going off to look for him at the beach. He wondered if maybe he should follow them.

No, he decided to follow the two men first and see where they were going. If he could catch them by surprise and somehow incapacitate them, that would be best. Then he could circle back and free Abby. If he could not take care of the men first, he would have to come up with a new plan.

Eric quietly started off in the direction the men had gone a few moments ago. It was silent until he stepped on a dead branch that let out a snap that sounded more like a gunshot. He froze and could not help but look back toward Abby, who started yelling at one of the women. The other one, the redhead, stared into the trees directly where Eric was standing frozen in position. *Does she see me?*

She stood and looked toward the woods, the other woman was completely occupied with Abby. Eric swallowed and crouched low, making himself as small as he could. Taking a couple of steps toward the tree line, she stood scanning the woods from a few feet beyond the fire. Her eyes stopped right on the spot where Eric crouched

motionless. Sweat dripped down his forehead, and he blinked tightly to clear it from his eyes. The seconds felt like hours. She took another step toward the trees and stared for another moment. The other woman turned and shouted something at her and the redhead turned around and walked back toward the fire.

Eric stayed motionless for another moment before continuing on, being extra careful to watch exactly where he was stepping. He could hear what sounded like digging and decided to follow that. He figured it must be the two men, unless there were more people out here than he had originally thought. A few minutes later he reached the edge of a very large, moonlit clearing in the trees, and he saw that it was exactly what it sounded like: digging. The two men were digging holes side by side near the edge of the clearing. He watched for a few minutes, trying to figure out what they were doing.

The men stopped and argued a bit about the size of the holes. At least that is what Eric gathered from the few words he picked up. They waived their arms, and one emphatically stuck his shovel in the ground, took the other man's shovel, and stuck it in the ground about six feet from the other one. *This is how big it should be.* At least in his mind that is what Eric imagined the context was. The other man seemed to agree and they both started digging again. They worked quickly, and within five minutes had a shallow hole dug, about six feet long and maybe three feet wide. A grave.

Instantly, he knew whom the graves were for. From his back pocket he pulled out a sharpened stick that he had found in another hole in the ground, much larger than these, while he had been

searching for Abby. There had been about a half dozen of them stuck into the side of that hole. It looked like someone had used them to climb out of there. At the time, he had figured it could be a weapon, if needed. He was glad now that he had grabbed it. He would not fail to protect her this time. If he had anything to say about it, these two unsuspecting men were digging their own graves.

The group decided that two of them, Tom and Sara, would go back to the beach to find Eric tonight. Sara wanted to do it herself, and nearly convinced them that she could. Her plan was simple – seduce him and slice his throat in the throes of passion. She presented a convincing argument, but Tom insisted on going in case anything went wrong. He wanted to make sure there were no hiccups. He pointed out that they would also have to bring Eric's body back, and that was something Sara could not do herself. The other four were instructed to stay behind, watch Abby, and start digging the graves.

It was all she could do not to look into the woods where she knew Eric was hiding. She wanted to see him. She wanted to communicate with him, but she did not want to give him away. After Tom and Sara left, the men went off through the trees, and a few minutes later Abby heard a faint sound in the distance. Based on the conversation that they had all just had in front of her, she assumed it was digging. She could not see them, but she could hear them. They were within earshot at least.

Abby was studying the faces of the two women watching her. The redhead was very pretty in the classic way that redheads are. She

was not very tall, but was taller than Abby, which was not an impressive accomplishment. Her fair skin was dotted with a few freckles high on her cheeks, but not too many. Abby figured that she was probably a few years older than her and had, like Sara, probably been here for quite awhile, judging by her too thin appearance. Had she seen her in everyday life, she probably would have described her as cute.

The other woman, staring directly at Abby, was not so pleasant to look at. She was probably pretty once upon a time, but the last time they had met, Abby's knife took care of that as it slashed across her face. She wore her black hair down over the left side of her face, trying to hide her injury, though it did a poor job.

They were both standing by the fire. Not close enough for Abby to make a move, but close enough to keep her from thinking she could. The redhead was keeping a low profile and not really looking at Abby. The knife in the hand of the closest woman was keeping Abby's attention just fine. It was her knife.

Abby spoke to her. "What's your name?"

"Fuck you."

The redhead behind her sighed. "I'm Emily, she's..."

"Shut your mouth!" the woman screamed at her. "She doesn't need our names any more than we need hers."

"I'm Abby," she smiled.

In the background, Emily did not smile, though she held Abby's gaze for a moment before looking away. The woman with the scar never broke her stare.

“Why are you doing this?” Abby asked.

“You did this to me,” the woman said. She held up Abby’s knife. “With this. I’m blind in this eye now.”

Abby said nothing.

Standing, the woman approached her, holding up the knife. “Do you know what that feels like? Of course not, but you’re going to find out.”

Abby looked away as the woman got closer. The cut across her face looked unnatural. It oozed something yellow. *Probably infected*, Abby thought.

“Tom is going to let me kill you. Right after your pretty boy is gone. I’m going to love every second of it.” She walked closer still. “I’m going to cut out both of your eyes first, but not until they drag his body in front of you. I’m going to make you stare at his lifeless corpse. It will be the last thing you ever see.”

Abby thought that the woman’s calm voice would have been unnerving had it not been for her knowledge that Eric was fine. She faintly saw him moving through the trees toward the sound of the digging. He stepped on something, a dry stick maybe, and it snapped loudly through the otherwise quiet scene.

The two women turned to look, but he was too well hidden in the dark trees. To direct her attention away from Eric’s hiding spot, Abby spit at the feet of the scarred woman who was standing mere feet in front of her.

“You like to start trouble, don’t you?” the woman asked.

“I like to start trouble? None of us would be here right now if

you would have left us alone. I think we would both be better for that.”

“Oh, that’s bullshit,” the woman spat. “Tom knows why you’re here. We all know why you’re here.”

Abby was trying to keep them distracted while Eric pursued the others. She was doing a fine job of keeping this woman’s attention, but the redhead behind her had stood up and was peering into the woods. Did she see him? If she did, how come she was not alerting everyone else?

She could still taste blood in her mouth. Again, she spit at the ground toward the woman’s feet. The woman pointed the knife toward Abby and stepped a little closer, standing within an arm’s length. “Don’t even think about it,” she said, looking at Abby’s feet. “Emily, bring those vines over here. Tie up her feet so she doesn’t make another run.”

Emily walked over with the vines and tried to hand them to the woman.

“No, you do it. I’ll hold the knife on her so she doesn’t pull anything.”

The two of them argued over who should tie up Abby’s feet, while Abby watched Eric disappear further into the trees toward the digging sounds. When she could no longer see Eric, she looked up at Emily, “So, she’s the one in charge?” she asked, indicating the woman holding the knife. “It seems to me that whoever is in charge should have use of both of their eyes, don’t you think?”

Suddenly, far off in the woods, Abby heard one of the men

scream. She knew Eric had made his move. The women turned their attention from Abby for a split second and swung around to see where the scream had come from. Emily immediately ran into the trees toward the screaming. The other woman remained frozen.

Her body was turned sideways to Abby, and she still had the knife. Abby had only a second to make a move before the woman would turn her attention back to her. Cocking her right leg back, she kicked out with it, slamming the base of her heel into the side of the woman's knee. She heard a loud pop, and watched the woman's leg bend out from under her, as if the knee was on the inside of her leg. The woman was shocked, and dropped to the ground, screaming in agony, her leg bent in a wholly unnatural position.

In her shock, she dropped the knife by her side to grab her knee. Abby picked up the knife with both hands to hold it on the woman. It was immediately obvious to her that the woman was in such pain that she posed no threat to Abby. While she writhed, screaming on the ground, Abby cut her own bonds and flexed her wrists. She looked at the woman on the ground and considered ending her suffering right there, but did not. The woman probably could not stand up, even if her life depended on it. It would not be right to kill her in this condition. She would not be a problem anymore.

Abby looked around the area for the sheath to her knife. She found it next to a rock by the fire that the woman had been using as a seat. She was crouched down, strapping it on, when Emily came back into the clearing. She did not see Abby, but she saw her friend writhing in pain on the ground. Looking around and not seeing their

prisoner, Emily started running toward her friend. With Emily only a few feet away, Abby sprang from her crouched position behind the rock. Propelling herself low and leading with her shoulder, she crashed into Emily's stomach.

As they collided, Abby pushed her small frame upward, flipping Emily over her back and sending her airborne. She snapped her head around just in time to see Emily land on the ground, flat on her back, the wind knocked clear from her lungs. Her eyes closed, and she fell motionless.

"Shit," Abby said, "did I just kill her?" She walked over, not wanting to get too close. She eventually saw Emily's chest rising and falling.

Hearing another scream from the direction of the men, Abby suddenly pictured Eric taking on those two guys at once. She had to help him, but could not risk Emily waking up and surprising them. The vine on the ground caught her eye, the one they had intended to use on Abby. She looked over to the half-blind woman, now sporting the busted knee and was struck with an idea.

She bound Emily's wrists with the vine, and then dragged her over to the other woman. Looking at the other woman Abby commanded, "Roll over."

Between gasps and groans, the woman managed to say two intelligible words: "Fuck... you."

"Wrong answer," Abby said. She swiftly kicked the woman's wounded knee as hard as she could. This produced an ungodly scream from the wretch lying on the ground. The next well-placed kick felt

like it cracked one of her ribs and convinced her to roll over. Using the rest of the vine, Abby quickly bound her wrists as tight as she could, leaving the two women bound together. Even if Emily did wake up, she would have to drag this anchor with her wherever she tried to go.

After giving the vine a final tug to make sure it was secure, Abby took off, running toward the sounds of the struggling men. The trees were thin here, and she moved through them quickly. The sky was getting lighter. Dawn would be coming soon. She followed the sounds of struggle to a very large clearing in the trees.

Fifty yards away on the far side of the clearing she could see a massive man on top of Eric whose feet were kicking furiously. Not knowing what else to do, she screamed, “HEY!” at the top of her lungs and ran toward them. After a moment, Eric’s feet stopped moving. The man sprung up, turning to see her approaching from across the clearing. She saw him look back at Eric lying motionless on the ground.

As she closed the distance, he turned away from Eric and faced her. He smiled. The sight of his smile made her stop dead in her tracks about thirty feet away. It made her sick to her stomach. *Is he dead?* She reached down and lifted her knife from its sheath, and began walking toward him.

Slowly she closed the distance. He towered over her small frame. Even at a distance it was clear that he was over foot taller and well over one hundred pounds heavier. He opened his arms, as if to welcome the fight. Her anger and hate welled up inside, searing

through her veins as she broke into a sprint to close the final gap.

Steps away from him she raised her knife, ready to plunge it into whatever part of his body it might find. Without warning, the side of his head exploded in a shower of blood, flesh and hair. The huge man collapsed to the ground like a building whose supports had given way.

Abby froze.

The man fell to reveal Eric standing behind him, holding a thick wooden branch the size of a baseball bat.

Abby was overcome with emotion, and the adrenaline coursing through her veins made her tingle all over. She wanted to scream. She wanted to break down and cry. She waived for just a second until their eyes met. He was breathing heavy and his eyes glazed over as if he might shed a tear at any moment. She walked close to him, never breaking eye contact. Putting her hands around his waist, she held him close, able to smell the fight, the desperation, and the fear.

She looked up into his eyes. Putting her hands behind his head, she brought him close and kissed him. It was a moment frozen in time, as though she had never kissed anyone before. His soft lips met hers, and everything else disappeared. The island, their helplessness, their fight to stay alive; all of it stopped existing for those few moments.

Finally, they pulled away. Eric smiled and said, "I've been wanting to do that for awhile now."

"Then why didn't you?" She pulled him close and kissed him

again. She broke away and looked around. There had been two men digging the graves. "Where's the other guy?"

"He's over there," Eric said, pointing toward the incomplete holes in the ground, "making use of the graves."

Squinting in the dim light, she saw the man lying in the very shallow hole. "What did you do there?"

"I did what had to be done," Eric said. "He was the easy one. This guy was one tough son of a bitch, though," he said, gesturing toward the huge man lying on the ground in front of them. "Where are the girls?"

"They're taken care of," she said.

"What did you do back there?"

"I did what had to be done," Abby said, smiling. "There is one other thing we have to do, though."

"What's that?"

"Get the hell out of here. I'm not quite as ruthless as you, I guess. The girls are still alive. They're not coming after us anytime soon, but Tom and Sara are going to figure out soon enough that you're not back at camp. When they come back here and see this mess, I don't think we should be here."

"Where do we go? This island is not that big." The sun was just beginning to crest over the trees behind them. If they did not leave the area soon, they would never avoid Tom and Sara, and they would not benefit from the darkness. "I think we need to go back to Robert and hide out with him for awhile."

"No," she said. "They'll just be waiting to find us when we

leave. Right now, we just have to deal with Tom and Sara. Let's finish this."

He asked, "What do you want to do?"

"You finished the raft yesterday, right?"

"I did. I don't think we know that it floats yet, but I did the best I could."

"We go then. We find out now. If it floats, we do not come back."

"I like a woman with a plan."

Abby laughed. "I'm just flying by the seat of my pants." She brought him close and kissed him one more time.

"Well that's fine, too," he said with a smile.

OLIVIA THOMAS SAT on her plush, brown leather couch in her large office in Los Angeles, staring at a giant screen. She was in the process of reviewing the final cut for this evening's broadcast. They never actually showed a death on network television, but she still cringed when she saw Eric's makeshift wooden stake slice through the air toward the big man's neck. The camera cut away a split second before it sunk into his neck, where, as they knew now, it hit an artery, causing him to bleed out within minutes. There was nothing the team on the ground could have done.

The audio, however, did not cut out. The sounds that were produced left nothing to the imagination. Just in case there had been any doubt in the viewers' minds that he was dead, the camera then cut to a shot of him lying in a shallow, half-dug grave in an absurdly large pool of blood.

She flipped off the picture and decided that she needed a little break. She never got used to the violence. She was an executive producer now, having worked her way up over the past decade, since the show's inception. Still, she never got used to it. It amazed her. If you put people in a corner, there would never be a shortage of ways they would find to hate and kill each other.

Just because they never showed an actual death on the airwaves, that didn't mean there was not a public demand to see such a thing. They would make an astounding amount of money on paid

subscriptions, where the viewer could see the carnage in every gruesome, super high-definition detail.

The show was absolutely never intended to be a violent one; however, some seasons did lend themselves to violence and killing. Admittedly this was not bad for ratings. In fact, the ratings were always higher in seasons with violence than in years without. Conflict made good drama, and good drama made great ratings. Fortunately, for the networks coffers, war was far more common than peace.

The windows across the west side of her office went floor to ceiling. Standing there, she watched the city skyline, thankful that the windows did not open. The air was fresher in her building than it was outside. It had been that way for twenty years, at least. She remembered the fresh air at her grandfather's strawberry farm up north, when she spent the summers up there as a little girl. Part of her missed those days.

Taking a step back, she was caught in the light and could see her reflection in the window. Her grandfather would be proud to see her today. Pretty, thin, dark features and pin-straight black hair. She was beautiful. Even in this city that continually redefined beauty, she was very comfortable in her body. But she wondered if he would be proud of who she was. She could almost hear his heavily accented voice, and it made her laugh. Of course he would be. There was one thing that impressed the man more than anything – money.

Olivia was the executive producer of *Trial Island*, undoubtedly the most successful show in the history of network television. In one year, she made tenfold what her poor immigrant grandfather made in

his entire life, and that was being generous. No television show had ever perfected the revenue stream like they had. Sure, some came close. The football league was raking in a huge sum, for the time, on their biggest game of the year. But that was one show, once a year.

Trial Island commercial time was like having the big game once a week, thirty-eight weeks a year. The few million dollars in prize money that the contestants could win was a paltry sum compared to the influx of cash the show brought in. There were two things about the public that were unquestionably true, and were the keys to the success of the program. First, in a gamble, everyone thinks they are going to be the winner. Second, the viewing public has an unquenchable thirst to see their idols torn down.

The show cannot go on indefinitely, though. Olivia, and really the entire executive team, knew that the current season, their tenth, was quickly approaching a tipping point. They might be able to squeeze another two, maybe three seasons out. That was if they were lucky. They were up against a technological block that had no good fix. She had spent the bulk of the morning trying to explain this to the network executives, who just could not grasp it.

The basis of the show they could understand. A drawing is held for contestants to enter. They need to be fit, and they need to be between the ages of twenty-five and thirty-five. Most important, they must be willing to receive the chip implant that allows them to have their memory wiped out back to a specific date.

That specific date was always the day before the show had been announced ten years ago. Before that happened, they would undergo

intense physical fitness and survival training. Any skills that could help them survive on the island, such as swimming or CPR, were drilled into them until the tasks could be completed on sheer muscle memory. The producers had found that this was the most effective way to ensure that they would retain useful skills after their memories were wiped out.

After their memories were wiped so that they never heard of *Trial Island*, they were drugged and dropped off on the island to fend for themselves. The rules of the game were simple. They had to be. If they survive a year, they win. If they escape, they win. However, no one had ever escaped the island, and very few survived a year. Just enough to keep people interested in entering the contest and becoming millionaires.

An ideal contestant was approximately thirty-two years old. They had found that the younger ones tend to take too many risks, and often wind up dying on the island, usually drowning or falling to their deaths. Older contestants often had started developing physical problems and could not make it through the training period.

The memory wipe was the key to the show. However, they did not have the technology to just erase the contestant's knowledge of the show. They had to wipe everything clean back to before the show was first announced. Due to the memory wipe of the last ten years, a contestant in their early thirties would believe they are in their early twenties. In the current season, the contestants are all thirty-two. Physically and mentally they believe they are twenty-two. In another five years, they would be wiping fifteen years from a thirty-two-year

old's memory, back to when they were seventeen. Their psychologists have confirmed that the shock of waking up in such a substantially older body would not process well enough to produce a viable contestant for the show.

They could continue to up the ages of the contestants for a few more years, but wiping a thirty-five-year old's memory back to the age of twenty was as far as any doctor or psychologist believed feasible. All the network executives heard, however, was that the most successful television franchise of all time was going away. Their vision was clouded by dollar signs.

Olivia would, of course, be fine. She was young, beautiful, rich, and running the biggest show on television. When *Trial Island* finally wrapped in the next few years, she would have her pick of jobs. Not that she would ever have to work again, but she loved the game too much to hang it up at this point in her life. She had considered what her next project would be. She was in the enviable position that she could choose to do whatever she wanted; sci-fi thriller, heart-wrenching drama, quirky comedy, she could choose anything. In her heart though, she knew that she would stick with reality television, there was just too much easy money to be made for her to ignore.

Her daydream was interrupted by a knock on the door.

Her assistant, Seth, poked his head in. "Olivia?"

"Come in."

Seth entered with a flourish. He did very little without a flourish. Occasionally, Olivia found this annoying. However, he was the most fantastically organized individual she had ever met, so it was

an annoyance she was willing to live with.

He stood in front of her holding his tablet. “You’re not going to believe this.” He paused.

“Well, don’t keep me in suspense. What is it?”

“Abby’s husband has an attorney. He claims he never signed off on her participation in the show, and he’s preparing to file a lawsuit.”

Olivia stood, mouth open, dumbstruck for a moment. “How did this get past legal?”

“Funny thing,” Seth turned his tablet so Olivia could flip through the mountains of waivers and signatures that the contestants and their spouses had to sign off on.

“He signed off on everything here. What’s his problem?”

“He claims that his signatures were forged, and he didn’t sign off on anything. Why do we need the spouse to sign off on this stuff anyway? As long as Abby is over eighteen, I don’t see what the problem would be.”

“It’s mostly for our protection. There is such a high possibility of death, even if Abby wants to sign off on it, the great State of California requires her spouse does as well, or it opens us up to all sorts of possibilities for litigation.”

“Well, the attorney said this guy didn’t even know where his wife had been for the past couple of months until she turned up on television. Crazy, huh?”

“Unbelievable. What does he want?”

“They want to talk to you. I’m just the messenger boy,” he said with a smile.

“They want money, that’s what they want. That’s what they always want. Set up a teleconference with them this afternoon. Get in touch with legal. Have Mike come down so we can figure this out.”

Seth cleared his throat. “Actually, they’re in the city. They want to meet in person. Today, if possible.”

“Well, what did you tell them?”

“I told them I would check your calendar and get back to them.”

Olivia was in the fortunate position that her calendar was usually clear. This was the only project she was working on at the moment, and once the show was up and in season, it basically ran itself.

“Alright, have them come in after lunch. Let me spend some time with Mike and figure out how much this is going to cost us.”

When Mike entered the room, heads turned. It did not matter who was in the room, their heads turned. With his broad, confident shoulders, his short-cropped, light brown hair, and his well-defined cleft chin, he had been mistaken more than once for a famous quarterback turned fashion model. Why he was an attorney behind the scenes, instead of in front of a camera, was anyone’s guess. If asked, he often told people that the money was just as good, the hours were better, and the women where no less plentiful. In truth, it was his opinion that actors were by and large people who had been blessed with good looks but not much in the way of brains. He was in this position because he had both.

Life was not bad for the tall, handsome, sometimes lover of Ms. Thomas. Olivia mused that some women might find it difficult to work with a man in this situation, but she found that it made things easier. She knew what buttons to push to get what she wanted when she needed to. She did not have to do any of that today, though. Still, she greeted him with a kiss on the cheek before they settled in to discuss the suit before them.

After the usual pleasantries, she started in, “We don’t have anyone witness this stuff when it’s being signed?”

“We actually do. I was in the room with a half dozen of the network attorneys while we went through all the paperwork with them. Abby had a man with her. He had an I.D. that said Bryce Haydenson. That is really about as far as we go when it comes to verifying that they are who they say they are.”

“Why go through all that trouble to hide this from your husband? She’s going on the biggest program in the country. Did she really think he wouldn’t find out?”

“I stopped trying to understand people’s motivations a long time ago. Especially women,” he added with a wink, which Olivia ignored.

“She never talked about her marriage even once. It never came up in any of her back-story interviews. Why is she trying to hide this guy?”

Mike speculated, “Must be a real prize.”

“So how much do you think it will cost us to make him go away?”

“That’s what you want to do?”

“Of course it is, Mike. The last thing we need is for this to become a story. Abby is one of the most well liked contestants we’ve had in years. She’s not available to defend herself, and who knows what this guy is going to come out with. If we make him go away, we don’t have to worry about any of that.”

“Makes sense.” Mike thought for a few minutes. “Well, our best bet is to just pay him off, and quick. If Abby is a winner in all of this, then maybe the payoff will be all for naught. Even if she divorces him, he’s going to get half of what she wins, thanks to our antiquated laws. But if she dies out there, that’s when this would turn into a shit-show real fast. Just the fact that he didn’t get to sign off on liability, and she gets killed... well, that would probably be the end of the show. Not to mention it would be a huge hit to the network. It goes without saying that they will go after the big man hard. When you have that many billions in assets, you might as well have a target painted on your back.”

“Agreed.”

“Good. Then let’s get them in here and sign off on things right away – before his attorney figures out that waiting could be a much bigger payday. What is the attorney’s name?”

“Ian Greene,” Seth called from the next room.

“Never heard of him. He’s probably some local the husband came out here with. Either way, let’s get on this right now. Every second we wait is time that she could take a dive off a cliff or run into that lunatic, Tom.”

Olivia laughed. "I wouldn't worry too much about Tom. This girl can handle herself. Wait until you see the show tonight."

"That good?"

"If I could, I'd put it on the line in Vegas for her to win this whole thing."

"Can't wait to see it," Mike said, then paused. "So what do you think about Bobby? Do we get him in the loop on this?"

"Bobby?"

He looked at her as if to say, "Really?"

She rolled her eyes, "You know if he finds out you call him that, you will be out the door before you even know what hit you."

"Well, he's not here now, is he? I figure I can get away with it when we're alone. It's our secret," he said with another wink.

"Sure," she said. "That's a good question, does 'Bobby' need to be involved?"

"I don't think so, no," Mike said, thinking about it. "We will get everything documented, make sure the show, the network, everyone involved is released from any exposure if she does die. Separately, we will have them sign away any claims to holding him personally liable, too. No need to get him all worked up over nothing if we're going to settle. We can fill him in after the fact."

"They will be here after lunch." She changed her posture, leaning forward and looking at him lazily. "How about you? Would you like to grab some lunch?"

"I was thinking we could eat in," he said with a smile.

"Seth!" Olivia shouted. "Hold my calls and lock the door."

IAN HUNG UP the phone and turned to his client, "Perfect. They want to meet this afternoon."

Ian Greene was a short, pudgy, balding, bearded fellow who fancied himself to be the top-notch legal protection of organized crime in the Midwest. In reality, he was in way over his head with the wrong people, but he was too dumb to realize it. His current client was a complete sociopath whose motives were near impossible for any sane person to wrap his head around, yet he had boarded a plane with him and flown to the West Coast anyway. It was just another in a lifetime of bad decisions.

Of course, people like his client tended to do well in his particular line of work, so it was more of an asset than a hindrance in this particular case. Ian stood proudly grinning with his hands on his hips, the front of his cheap suit jacket open, and his sizable gut straining the buttons on his white button-up shirt.

"Good." Bryce had been pacing the large hotel suite that they had occupied for the past day. He stopped to study himself in the mirror. His efficiency was only exceeded by his meticulousness. He ran his hands through his short blond hair in frustration, then produced a comb from his pocket and smoothed the loose strands back in place. He had the intense face that a man in his line of work should, though the average person on the street would just assume he was a miserable person who never smiled.

He had been happy once. As a young child, he remembered happiness. He was convinced he was an exceptionally happy kid, until his mother took off and left him to be raised by his semi-abusive father. He had been chasing that happiness ever since, but never quite caught up.

He loved his work, though. He saw it as man's work. To someone from the outside, he intimidated, conned, swindled, and killed to get what he wanted and make things happen, but to anyone on the inside, he was the wet dream of organized crime bosses everywhere. He was a man who relished being in control, and did whatever it took to get the job done.

He did not take well to disobedience, whether in his work or in his personal life, which were often one in the same. Abby had started off as work. He had taken her off the streets years ago, and eventually made her his wife. She was young, impressionable, and most importantly obedient when they had met, and proved to be easily controlled and manipulated. That is, until he stepped from the shower a few months ago and found that she had disappeared from his expensive apartment – and from his life entirely – only to turn up on national television a few months later.

“How could she do this to me? I thought I had that bitch under control.”

“Hey, she did you a favor. Do you know how much cash you are going to make off of this? We are talking about huge money. This is the biggest show on television. Trust me, they want this to go away, and they have the money to spend.”

Bryce roared, "I don't want money!"

"What are you talking about?"

"I do not want money. I do not need money. I want Abby. After everything I have done for her, how could she just up and leave like that? I love her. I will fucking kill her."

Ian spoke slowly, trying to calm his client. "Bryce, I know you're doing well. I mean, look at that suit you are wearing! You're a rising star, buddy. Everyone in the organization loves you. The boss loves you. You are a made man, leapfrogging guys who have been doing this since you were a kid. Sure you've got a young, hot wife, but they are a dime a dozen where you're heading. What do you need her for?"

Bryce spoke through his teeth. "She is my wife. She has run off. She belongs here with me. That's what I need her for. I need her here, where she is supposed to be."

"I'm just saying, what is the worst outcome here? She is probably going to die out there. If she does, I will make sure you get a payout, and you won't have her to deal with anymore."

"Die out there? Obviously you have not been watching the same show I am," he said, gesturing toward the television. The sound was muted, but it was tuned into the *Trial Island* channel, a twenty-four-hour satellite channel dedicated to the show, on top of its regular airings on the network. The analysts had spent the better part of the last hour dissecting Abby's latest attack and escape, showing everything in slow-motion detail. "They said this morning that she is going to win the whole thing!"

“So she wins the whole thing. She gets rich, and you get half. Where is the bad in that?”

“I do not want her to be rich. If she is rich, what does she need me for? I want her to be off that island and back here.”

A young woman, barely half his age, emerged from the bedroom wearing only a smile and a tired look in her eyes. Her thick dark hair hung down over her bare chest, just barely covering enough to leave something to the imagination. “Mr. Haydensson, how much longer do you think you’ll be? I have to get back to work at the club soon.”

Ian turned away. “I’m sorry. I didn’t know you had company.”

“Don’t worry about her modesty, Ian, she doesn’t have any.” Bryce smiled at the girl. He had picked her up last night from a local strip club owned by one of his associates out here. He might not have much in the way of friends, but he had associates everywhere, and people who could be counted on for favors. Especially when he was in an unfamiliar city and needed some company. “It’s Faye, right?”

“Yes.”

“Faye, come over here for just a second,” he gestured for her to come closer. She approached with a smile. He stopped her in front of him, putting his hands on her shoulders. “Now, Faye, men are talking here. Mr. Greene and I are discussing something very important. Didn’t your daddy ever tell you not to interrupt when men are talking?”

“I didn’t have a daddy, Mr. Haydensson.” She smacked her gum, “Well, I actually guess I did, but I never met him.”

He chuckled and looked at Ian. "Well, isn't that shocking?" He looked back at her, and fast as lightening, slapped her in the face with his open hand.

She grabbed her face. "You piece of sh..."

He slapped her again, and she was silent. "Faye, when men are talking, you do not interrupt. Nod your head if you understand."

She did so, without removing her hand from her face.

"Good. Now be a good girl and go lay on the bed and wait for me. I don't know how long I will be. Do not ask again." As she turned to leave the room, he smacked her ass hard enough to make her yelp. Turning to Ian, he said, "The trick is to hit them hard enough to get their attention, but not leave a mark."

"If you say so."

"What? You've got to keep them in their place." He looked at the television. "Speaking of, how are we going to get her back in her place?"

"I'll do what I can, but she's on an island, halfway across the world. Few people know exactly where it is. Even if we did, it's completely inaccessible from what I've heard in the press about the show. They do not want any gawkers just showing up there, and they don't want anyone getting off the island either, so they have got some sort of protection surrounding the place. If they do not want to let her go, I don't think there's much we can do about it." He gestured toward the television, "Based on this, I don't see them just letting her walk away."

"What are you saying?"

“I’m saying I think we would have better luck going after the money and forgetting about getting her off the show. I will try, but no promises.”

“Do not tell me you will try. Tell me it will get done. If you cannot do it, I will get it done myself. One way or another, she is coming back.”

“Let’s see how the meeting goes this afternoon and take it from there.”

Bryce sat down on the plush leg of one of the armchairs and watched the screen intently. The television replayed the full sequence of Abby taking out her captors around the campfire, the first night that she and Eric were taken.

“Who is this bitch anyway?” He said out loud. She certainly did not resemble the meek little girl he had tied up in his bed a few months ago. It was Abby. But at the same time, it was not.

“I’m going to get something to eat,” Ian said. “Meet you downstairs in an hour?”

“Sure,” Bryce replied. He did not take his eyes off the screen as Ian let himself out. Bryce was having second thoughts. Did he want to deal with this woman? He looked through the bedroom door at Faye lying on the bed, naked, and waiting. That is the kind of girl he likes. Obedient. That is the kind of wife he had. He had spent years perfecting their relationship.

Who changed her? “DAMN IT!” he growled, smashing his fist against the wall. She did not do this on her own. Someone must have helped her. Someone changed her. That thought enraged him almost

as much as seeing her strut around that damned island with another man.

He walked into the bedroom and took off his shirt. Opening a bag on the nightstand, he took out a pair of silver handcuffs, and tossed them at Faye. “Be a good girl and put these on,” he said, flashing a crooked smile at her. “It’s time I worked off some of this stress.”

IAN WAS GRANDSTANDING in Olivia's office. "Forged! Every single one of them, forged. How could you people let this happen?"

Olivia was significantly calmer. "We followed all standard practices, Mr. Greene, and I can assure you that neither myself nor anyone on the staff had even the slightest hint that there was anything going on here. We would never intentionally let a spouse get cut out of the loop like this." She looked at Bryce, "I hope you know that we are very sorry this happened."

Ian went right back in. "Oh, you're sorry," he announced to the ceiling, sarcasm dripping from his lips. "She is sorry! Well that makes it all better, now doesn't it?"

Mike spoke up. "No, it doesn't, but..."

"But nothing. What if she dies out there? What about that? My client's wife of five years left him, without a word and ran off to join your circus. If she dies out there, how is he supposed to live with that?"

Olivia spoke up. "It is not our fault that she went to these great lengths to circumvent the system and make sure he did not know anything about what she was doing. It seems to me that she was trying to cut him out. She is out there with her memory wiped right now, which means she doesn't even know who he is. This was not a surprise to her. She must have wanted it this way."

She immediately knew that she had misspoken when Bryce

slammed his fist down on the thick wooden conference table.

“Just who the hell do you think you are?” he said, standing up. Ian stood next to him, putting his hand on his shoulder, encouraging him to relax.

“I apologize for my client,” he said. “He is obviously under a great deal of stress.”

“I’m sorry, too,” Olivia conceded. “That did not come out right.”

“You said something about her memory was wiped? She doesn’t even know who I am anymore? What exactly did you do to her? You erased her memory?”

“I am sure one of our tech guys could explain it better than I could, but nothing was erased. It is just hidden, temporarily.”

Bryce was confused, but very curious, “So it’s some sort of a hypnosis trick or something?”

Olivia could not believe that he did not know about this. Even if his wife was not on the show, they had been using the technology for ten years, and it was pretty big news at the time the show was announced. “No, it is not hypnosis. It is a chip implant that allows us to map the brain and memories, like files on a computer. Also, like a computer, we can hide certain files, as well. In the case of the contestants, we hide their memories back to before the show was announced. This way, they have no knowledge of what the show is or what they are participating in.”

“You guys attached a chip to my wife’s brain?”

“Again, I am not any sort of tech guru, but as I understand it,

it's a bio-digital implant. It's part living tissue, part silicon. It is not exactly microscopic, but it's not much bigger than a flea. It was originally developed for the military, to allow the user to interface directly with computer systems. We have adapted it for this particular use. There have been tons of studies; there is absolutely no long-term harm."

Ian commented, "Well, at least that is good to know."

"But she signed off on this," Mike assured them. "She was fully aware that this was going to happen. It was completely her choice. Nothing was done without her knowledge and consent."

"And that is supposed to make me feel better?" Bryce was still boiling under his skin.

"I'm just saying she entered the drawing, she won the chance to compete, she got through the training, and signed off on the memory wipe. We did not just pluck her off the street to do this. This was entirely intentional on her part. Trust me, it is a hell of a lot of work to actually make it through all of the steps and onto the show. She did not do this on a whim."

Ian spoke up again. "So this drawing she won – I am not entirely familiar with the process. She won money?"

"No," Olivia answered. "She did not win any money. She won the chance to compete. As far as a drawing goes, it's pretty decent odds. We only accept U.S. contestants between eighteen and thirty-five, but truth be told, we are looking for contestants around thirty-two-years old, give or take a year. That is a lot of people. However not all of them are into the concept of risking their life, even if it means

millions of dollars. On average, between twenty and thirty thousand enter each season. Of those, fifty candidates are selected to audition.”

Mike picked it up. “So the drawing is just for the chance to audition. The first part of the audition is a physical. Contestants must be in good basic health and pass a toxicology screening. That usually cuts the field by ten to fifteen contestants. The second part is a physical test, a three-day, mini-survival camp. This typically cuts the field in half to about twenty finalists. The third part is a psychological screening. They dig in deep to see what the contestant’s lives were like back at the time their memory will be erased to. They must be able to essentially pick up at that point without much of a problem.”

Olivia continued. “The last part of the audition process is to sell yourself to the judges. Why should they pick you to be on the show? Four contestants, two men, and two women, are chosen to train. The entire audition process is a huge event unto itself. Like any other reality contest, the public starts choosing their favorites right away.” She was looking at Bryce, who appeared completely dumbfounded. “I’m sorry,” she said, “I just cannot believe that you are completely unfamiliar with the show. It’s the biggest thing on television right now.”

“So I have learned,” he said. “I just don’t have a lot of time to waste watching these things.”

“She is a public favorite. She is also a favorite to go all the way,” Olivia said. “I would say you’re making out pretty good in this deal.”

Bryce nearly exploded, “I certainly don’t need you to tell me

how good a deal I'm getting here Miss Thomas, because it seems like a rotten deal to me."

She paused to choose her words carefully. "I don't know what her plans are after the show, but if she wins, half of that cash is yours according to the State of California. I fail to see how this is the bad thing."

His bright blue eyes stared right through her. "It is a very bad thing, Miss Thomas. It is a very bad thing when your wife disappears without a word. It is a very bad thing when your wife has so little respect for you that she completely cuts you out of her decision to run off and risk her life."

She exchanged a glance with Mike, looking for help. It was time to ask the question. "Mr. Haydenson," he said, "I completely understand how upset you are. I cannot even imagine being in your shoes right now. But what is done is done. Now how much is it going to take to turn this very bad thing into a very good thing, and keep us out of the courtroom?"

Ian took the lead to answer. "How much does she get if she wins?"

Bryce held up his hand. "No." He looked at Ian, then at Mike. "You don't understand. I don't want your money. I want my wife. I want her off the show and back here where she belongs. She had no business running off like this, and I intend to correct that."

"Excuse me?" The words escaped her mouth before her thought was finished.

"Oh, you heard me just fine, Miss Thomas."

Ian spoke up. "My client is very concerned for the safety of his wife. That's all. You can see why he wants her off the show." He shot a look at Bryce. "But let's be realistic. I know she is very popular. I know you want to keep her on the air. Let's talk about how we can put my client's mind at ease."

Bryce was not saying anything, but he was not buying in either. He watched while the three of them discussed the logistics of getting her off the show. The public outcry and backlash would be a nightmare for them. He figured they probably would pay out a ton of money. Why not take that money and use part of it to finance his way to the island and bring her home himself?

He thought about that. It could not be that difficult. The boss would not be happy that Bryce would be away for a while. He will probably be even less happy that he has to take a crew with him. Nothing that some cash in the boss's pocket would not fix, though. As he thought through the beginning of his plan, he decided that taking her off the island might prove difficult. There would be cameras, and there must be some type of crew there. But if he waited until she got off the island herself, she would not even remember him.

They had done some additional research before the meeting and had a general idea of where the island was. He knew he could fly a crew there in just under seventeen hours. He could take a few guys with him to scope the place out for a month or so to see if she makes it off. He would stick around as long as he could, but he couldn't stay there indefinitely. With some money to grease some palms he should be able to get inside information and have someone get word to him

as soon as she made it off the island though. If she did, he would be ready.

“Let’s do it,” he interrupted. They all turned to look at him. “Let’s talk settlement. She is doing great. Why ruin a good thing, right?” His smile was not authentic, but then again, what was in this business?

Ian smiled back at his client before turning to Mike. “Would you mind excusing us for a few minutes so we can discuss?”

“Not a problem,” Mike said. “Take all the time you need.”

Ian and Bryce went into the reception area, leaving Olivia and Mike behind.

“What is his deal?” she asked.

“He is in with organized crime in the Midwest. Low to mid-level, from what our guy could dig up on short notice.” He was checking information on his tablet. Their investigator was sending him real-time information as he dug it up. “Well, this is interesting,” he turned it for her to view.

“These are hospital visits?”

“Yep. Looks like she’s been laid up a few times. Funny, she doesn’t strike me as the clumsy type, but she does a lot of falling apparently. Obviously our guy assumes that she is getting beaten up, but she has never pressed charges.”

“What a piece of shit. Do we have to give him anything?”

“Of course we don’t *have* to. But if we don’t, this thing is going to court, and I do not like our chances in front of a judge. I doubt we would have to pull her off the show, but if she winds up dead, we’re

sunk. It makes more financial sense just to get her off now, before something stupid happens.”

“Are you crazy? She’s favored to win, and is the most popular contestant we have had in years! She tests through the roof. No way is she coming off the show. Let’s just pay this jackass and be done with him.”

“I think that’s the best plan, we’ll see what he thinks.”

“REMIND ME, why are we here? I say we just head straight for the raft,” Eric said.

He and Abby crouched in the brush about fifty yards from their camp. It was as close as they dared get for the moment.

“I’m going in there to get the solar bag,” Abby whispered.

“Like hell you are.”

“Eric, God knows how long it is going to take us to get over to the other island. If we are going to head out without a way to purify drinking water, we may as well just stay here and die. We won’t make it more than a day in this sun without water.”

He thought about it. “Well, you ain’t goin’ in to get it. I’ll go.”

“How is it that you think I’m not capable enough to do it myself?”

“You are, but I’ve got a feeling this is a trap.”

“We’ve been sitting here for close to an hour. There is no sign of Tom or Sara. I’m sure they figured you went looking for me. They probably gave up hanging out and waiting for you well before we got here, and they’re heading back to their own camp for sure. We had better get our bag and head out of here before they get to their camp and see how we left the rest of them.”

She stood up to make her way to their shelter. Eric grabbed her by the elbow to stop her. “I’ll go.”

Abby was dazed after standing up so quickly. His grabbing her

had steadied her as much as it stopped her. She had a splitting headache. Feeling the back of her head, she remembered how she was clubbed unconscious last night, just as she made her way out of that pit.

“Are you OK?”

“Yes, I’m fine. I just stood up too fast.” She took a knee to compose herself. “Why do you think you should be the one to go?”

“I’m bigger and stronger. If they are waiting out there, I want to deal with them.”

“Yes, well, I’m smaller and faster,” she smiled.

“Fine, we’ll both go.”

Abby thought about that, “No, one of us should stay back, just in case. You can be the big man this time. I’ll wait here.” She gave him a kiss. Abby was not giving in; she just hated the thought of him having to come to her rescue if this was, in fact, a trap.

He knew she was placating him, but he was fine with that. They had a clear sightline to the shelter. The oars were propped against the side. He would walk straight in, grab the bag and oars, and then head on a diagonal path to the beach. She would cut straight through the trees to the beach. There, they would meet and launch the raft. It was the best kind of plan. A simple one.

Eric had made it more than halfway without incident. Still, Abby did not allow herself to relax. If Tom and Sara were waiting, they would probably be right in camp, possibly even inside the shelter she had built. Abby figured if they were in there, she should probably be closer than she is.

Standing from her crouched position, she took several cautious steps forward. Something seemed off, but she could not place it. She heard something rustle, directly behind her. Abby reached down to grab her knife, but another hand beat her and was holding it against her throat before she could process what had just happened.

Abby reached up to grip the hand as Sara whispered in her ear, “Go ahead and scream. It will be the last sound you ever make.”

Her warning scream to Eric stopped in her throat. However, she did not loosen her grip on Sara’s hand. She tried prying the hand from her neck, but did not want to make Sara press the knife into her flesh any harder. Her adrenaline was pumping as her mind raced trying to figure out a solution.

Sara continued to whisper to her, “Tom is right up there. He is right in that nice little shelter you built. Want to guess what’s going to happen? Well, of course, you know what’s going to happen. We’re going to kill that good-looking man of yours. It’s really a shame you never got to seal the deal with him.”

Abby struggled a bit less, hoping to get Sara to relax. Almost immediately, she felt Sara’s hand lighten up a bit.

“You would be surprised just how hard it can be to kill someone Abby. I mean, sure, we could just run him through with this knife here, but where is the fun in that? Don’t worry. We’ve had awhile to think about things, waiting here all night for him to show up. You’re a nice surprise, though.”

Abby realized they had been here all night. Meaning they had not been back to their camp to see the carnage she and Eric had left

behind. She breathed a slight sigh of relief.

“Tom will be happy to see you, I’ll tell you that. We weren’t going to kill Eric right away. Just knock him out, or break his legs, then drag him back to camp so we could kill him in front of you. But you made it so much easier by showing up here yourself! Your man is a big drink of water. That was not going to be fun dragging him back.”

Abby was watching Eric. He was getting very close to the shelter. If he gets there and Tom surprises him, even if she could figure out some way to intervene, he might still wind up with some sort of broken limb. That just would not do.

She gripped the knife as hard as she could, trying to pry it away from her neck. Her muscles strained as she forced the knife from her throat. She managed to gain an inch of clearance before kicking her heel back into Sara’s shin with every ounce of strength she had. Sara’s grip on the knife loosened just for a second, but it was long enough for Abby to rip it from her hand. Spinning forward out of her grip, she swung her arm back just hoping to connect with something. Elbow cocked, she slammed the bone of her elbow into the bridge of Sara’s nose. They were both stunned. Blood gushed from her nose as she collapsed to the ground.

Eric heard the commotion and turned to see Abby sprinting toward him. “Look out!” she screamed, pointing behind him.

He turned, as Tom was in mid-swing, bringing what looked like a large club straight down toward Eric’s head. Eric made a quick move to the right and raised his arm. This caused the club to graze his left

shoulder. He threw an uppercut that connected to Tom's jaw with a crack, sending him reeling backwards.

Abby was closing the distance, but was only halfway there when Tom recovered. Still on the ground, he caught Eric by surprise and smashed the club into the side of his leg, sending Eric collapsing to the ground. Tom quickly sprung up and raised the club to bring it down and presumably break Eric's leg.

Eric was on the ground, and Abby was too far away. She would not get there in time. She did the only thing she could think of. Screaming, she threw her knife at Tom with every bit of force she could muster. Her scream caused him to look up as her knife sailed through the air toward him.

Before his mind could register what was happening, the knife caught him and glanced off of the side of his neck. For a second, Abby thought he had escaped uninjured. Then she realized that it must have hit something important, as a fountain of blood sprayed through the air. He was so stunned, he did nothing as a few seconds later Abby tackled him at a full sprint, and they crashed to the ground.

She rolled off him to the right as he tried to stand up. Every heartbeat sent blood spewing from the gash in the side of his neck. He never made it up from his knees. A moment later, he collapsed to the ground and lay there in a heap. She had not seen where the knife had wound up after hitting him, and there was no time to look. It was time to go. Anyone who was close enough to stop them was incapacitated for the moment, but who knew how long that would last.

She helped Eric to his feet. He was hobbling, but getting around

well enough. Tom had caught him just above the knee with his club. They grabbed the bag and four of the oars, and moved as fast as they could to the raft on the beach.

They left the oars on the sand while they hauled the raft from the tree line toward the water. It was a decent-sized raft, long enough and wide enough for two full-grown adults to lie on it comfortably and easily accommodate a third, as they originally built it with the thought that Sara would be joining them on their trip. It took some effort, but the two of them eventually got it to the water. The tide was going out, so the sand was hard and wet, which made the trip in a little easier. Wasting no time, they pushed the raft into the water to find that it did, indeed, float.

“Well, look at that,” Eric said with a smile. “Hold it here. I’m gonna grab the oars. We’ll be off this rock in just a couple of minutes.”

“Finally!”

“Don’t leave without me.”

“I wouldn’t dream of it.” She grabbed him by the shirt and pulled him in for a kiss.

She watched him trot up the beach toward the tree line to grab the oars. Turning, she looked out over the water at the island in the distance. The water was sparkling in the early morning sun. With any luck, they would get there before the sun sets tonight, and start finding their way back to... where? They could not just go their separate ways. Not after what they had been through together. She had never been to Texas, but that was an adventure she certainly was willing to take.

A small swell caused their raft to bump against her leg and brought her back from her daydream. She turned her gaze from their future back toward Eric with a smile. He was smiling back only ten paces away, but Abby gasped as she saw Sara running up fast behind him. Sara's entire chest was covered in blood that was still flowing from her broken nose. Her face was smeared with blood and tears, nearly to the point that it was unrecognizable. In her right hand, Abby saw that she had found the knife, which meant she had also found Tom.

Eric saw Abby's face, but he was slow to react. Too slow. Abby abandoned the raft and dashed past him, grabbing Sara's knife hand and wrestling her away just before she reached Eric. Sara landed a left hook to Abby's ear, sending her sprawling onto the sand. Sara jumped on top of her, but Eric swiftly kicked her in the ribs knocking the wind out of her, flipping her on her back in the sand. The knife landed a few feet out of reach.

He jumped on top of Sara, pinning her hands to the ground. He shouted at Abby, "Get the raft!"

"What?"

"The raft! It's floating away!"

Abby looked out to the raft that was quickly being carried out with the tide.

"Go! What are you waiting for?"

"No, finish her off! Then we swim out together."

"Finish her off? Are you insane? I'm not going to kill an unarmed woman that I've got pinned to the ground. Get the raft and

bring it back. It's gonna be gone in another thirty seconds."

Abby did not move. She was paralyzed by indecision.

"GO!" he screamed at her.

Reluctantly she dove into the water and swam out toward the raft. It did not take long. However when she climbed on top of it she was shocked at just how far out she was. She was at least twenty yards out, maybe more. She could see the oars on the beach next to Eric and Sara. With no other way to paddle in, she laid chest down with her arms hanging over the front and tried paddling back toward the shore with her hands. The water splashed up in her face, so she could not see her progress. She paddled her hardest until her arms were dead tired and she stopped to look up, figuring she must be close.

She felt the air rush from her lungs as she saw that she was even farther out than when she started. Eric and Sara were struggling on the beach. Looking from at least sixty yards out, they were tiny. She laid down again, hanging her legs off the back of the raft and kicking. She was not making any progress. She kicked harder, but felt the current carrying her out still farther. In this position, she could at least see them clearly on the beach.

They were on their feet now, though Abby couldn't figure out how Sara had slipped out from under him. Sara had the knife, and Eric had an oar. He was swinging at her, but she kept her distance so he did not catch anything but air. Someone else came running through the trees and yelled at them. Abby recognized her fiery red hair even at this distance. It was Emily, the one that she had left unconscious and tied up a few hours ago. The other woman, with the broken leg,

was nowhere to be seen.

Sara never took her eyes off of Eric. However, Eric turned when the redhead yelled out something Abby could not hear. She was too far out to hear what was said, and too far out to hear Eric scream when Sara slashed him with the knife, though she saw it clearly. Abby screamed, and jumped onto the raft. She was still going out to sea quickly, caught in some sort of riptide. She saw the redhead streaking across the sand toward Eric and Sara. Eric was lying on the sand, clutching his side, helpless.

Her arms and legs were dead tired, but she could not just float out here and watch him die. She had to try. Using the raft as a platform, she dove into the water and swam as hard as she could. She was going against the current, and fighting a losing battle. The pain burned through her shoulders, and she could not see the beach over the swells in the water. She did not make it five minutes before she was forced to give up, smacking the water with her open hand in frustration.

She looked behind her. The raft was bobbing in the water not far from her. Being behind her, she paddled over to it with the current at her back with little effort, and clung on. Her arms and shoulders were burning. Fighting through the pain and the tears, she managed to pull herself up onto the raft. The raft that Eric had built, that was saving her life at this moment, even though she could do nothing for him.

She finally worked up the courage to turn toward the beach.

It was empty. They were gone. He was gone.

Abby felt rage and hatred boiling up from her stomach. Crying, she collapsed onto the raft, pounding the hard wood with her fists until her hands were bleeding. She screamed to the endless and empty sea and made a vow to herself that she would get back to the island. When she did, she would kill anyone left on that godforsaken rock.

ABBY'S EYES SQUINTED as they opened in the bright midday sun. She wondered how long she had been floating out here. Hours? Days? She thought hard to remember. She recalled being wet and shivering in the middle of the night. She ultimately decided that she had been out here at least a full twenty-four hours. Judging by the overhead sun, she had spent much of the morning sleeping, and it was close to noon. She readjusted her assessment and figured she had probably been floating out there for a day and a half by now.

Her throat and lips were completely dry. Eric had stuffed the solar bag into his back pocket when they left the shelter. Eric. She wanted to cry at just the thought of his name. Although her body had been wracked with sobbing throughout the night, she realized now that her eyes were not welling up with tears anymore; they just hurt. She was getting severely dehydrated. If she did not get back to land soon, she would not be getting back to land at all.

Sitting up, she stretched her arms. What had been a bad headache yesterday had progressed into a searing migraine today. It began at the base of her neck where she had been clubbed the night before, and seemed to reach throughout her entire brain. Not only had she been knocked unconscious last night, but had gone over a day without food or water.

She wondered if her shoulders were sore from the paddling yesterday, or sore from sleeping the night on this array of mismatched

logs? Looking around, she could not believe that she was still in relatively close proximity to the island. She was probably a few hundred yards out at most. The raft was moving swiftly enough, but it was not moving away from the island. In fact, it seemed to be moving in a counterclockwise circle around the island.

Over the next hour, she watched as the beach where she had first met Eric a few weeks ago appear in front of her. The cave where they had nearly been drowned looked rather innocuous at the moment. Slowly she passed by the beach, going left to right. She thought about jumping from the raft and trying to swim in. Remembering how disastrously that had turned out the previous morning, she thought better of it. Today she was significantly weaker.

She decided she would close her eyes and rest. Later, when the sun was lower in the sky, it would not be so hot and she would feel stronger. Her mind was set. She refused to die floating out here on this raft, even if making a swim for land was certain death. If she was going to die, at least she was going to die trying. Lying in the warm sun, she began drifting off almost immediately.

In her half lucid state, she began dreaming. There was a man. He was handsome, and she was drawn to him. But he was hurting her. She could not describe it, but when she was with him her body was wracked with pain. She could not escape him. She was helpless and trapped, unable to reach out or turn around. She tried to see his face, but he did not have one. His shape was familiar, but only a foggy memory. She was struggling now, wriggling, kicking, and scratching. He was unfazed and laughing at her. The feeling of naked

vulnerability encompassed her while she struggled.

She was stuck in a state between dreams and consciousness and began willing herself to wake up from the nightmare. Her limbs were paralyzed, but she continued to struggle. She felt helpless in reality as much as she did in her nightmare. Finally with a gasp, she shot up screaming, and remembered where she was.

“What the hell was that?”

Looking around to get her bearings, she could not place exactly where around the island she was. The sun was getting lower in the sky. She must have slept longer than she thought. It had seemed like just a few minutes. She leaned to the edge of the raft. Not willing to test her muscles just yet, she splashed some cool seawater on her face. It was just a dream, but it felt so real. Her heart was pounding in her throat.

Stretching out on the raft, she took stock of her faculties. Her head felt a little better, though she still had a bump on the back of it, which throbbed with every heartbeat. Her arms and legs, while still weak, did not feel quite as sore as they did earlier. She would feel a little more confident if she knew exactly where on the island she was, though. Looking in, she appeared to at least be closer to land than she had been before.

Earlier, she had figured that she was at least three hundred yards off shore when the raft had passed by the beach. Now she could not be more than one hundred yards out, and it almost seemed as though she was continuing to get closer. Maybe the tide was going in, she wondered.

There was some sort of inlet and cove up ahead. She did not recognize it, but the raft seemed to be heading in that direction, so that was where she was going. She lay on her back and pedaled her feet in the air to see how her legs felt. They were tired, but the soreness was gone, and she knew they were stronger than her arms.

She loosened one of the vines toward the back of the raft, so that she would have something to grip onto. Hanging her feet off the back and into the water, she began kicking. Within a few minutes, her thighs burned. The pain was inside her legs and muscles, but to her surprise, she seemed to be making progress. She kicked harder toward the island and within ten minutes cut her distance to land in half. The pain intensified, but she was numb to it. She was only focused on getting back to shore.

The raft entered the inlet very close to the edge on her left. With only several yards to go she looked to the side and could see through the clear blue water, right down to the sandy bottom. She decided to let go of the raft and swim diagonally to the shore. The sand dropped off sharply not far from the edge, but she figured she was only a few feet from being able to touch bottom anyway.

She let go and tried to put her feet down into the sand, the water was about chest high. Her legs immediately gave out from under her and she fell. She flailed, trying to get closer to shore, but her limbs would not cooperate. Each time she tried to stand, she was knocked over. She watched as the raft drifted away from her and beached itself further down the inlet. Abby wondered if she should just try to follow it? She was so disoriented that she did not even

realize the strength of the current she was trying to fight. Each time she fell, she had more difficulty standing up again.

Finally, she managed to stand. Knowing she would be pulled down again, she did her best to fall forward, her head landing on the wet sand at the water's edge. She lay there for a moment, still in the water from the hips down, feeling the current tug at her feet. She reached up to grab anything she could. A rock, sea grass, even sand. She was willing to take anything she could grip in order to aid her in dragging herself fully out of the water.

She was shocked to feel a hand grab hers. Abby looked up to see Robert's smiling face. He grasped her under the shoulders, pulled her out of the water and helped her walk from the water's edge into the shade of the nearby trees. She let go of him with the intention of sitting on the ground against the thick trunk of a tree. Instead, her knees buckled and she collapsed to the ground right where she stood.

"What in the world happened to you?"

Abby tried to speak, but only made a rasping sound. She attempted to clear her throat, and winced in pain, as if a thousand razors were slicing the inside of her throat. He handed her a small canteen, which she drained in seconds, not spilling a drop.

"Thanks," she croaked after a few moments, handing him the empty canteen. He handed her a second one that was full. She gulped down half of it before taking a break and looking at him. "Thanks again," she said more clearly.

He asked again, "What happened?"

Her breathing finally began to slow. She took another gulp

from the canteen and handed it back. “We were trying to make our escape off the island.” Her mind wandered back to yesterday morning, and she began to choke up. She swallowed, trying to get rid of the lump in her throat. “They killed him. He saved me, and they killed him.”

Abby broke down as Robert put his arm around her. “It is alright,” he said. “They are not here. No one is going to hurt you.”

She yelled, “They already have! They killed him. He saved my life. Twice! We were almost out. The raft was floating away.” She paused to compose herself. “He knew. He knew that if I swam out to the raft that I wouldn’t be able to make it back. He was just buying time, holding them back so I would be safe.”

She recounted the last few days for Robert – Sara showing up and befriending them, her getting caught in the trap, Eric saving her at the camp, killing Tom. By the time she recounted last seeing Eric, lying on the beach while she watched helplessly from the raft, she showed no emotion. She was not crying anyway. She was angry. She was furious and filled with hate.

“I’m going to kill them, Robert. I’m going to kill every one of them.” She tried to stand. Her legs shook under her as she braced herself against the tree, until she felt her footing was secure. He stood an arm’s length away as she tried to take a step, and he caught her as her legs gave out.

“Abby, I understand what you are feeling right now. However, you are not going to do anything but get yourself killed in this condition.” Their eyes met, only inches apart.

“You smell like rosemary,” she said.

He laughed. “There are worse things I could smell like, I suppose. I picked some fresh this morning to make with roast potatoes and a wild duck for dinner. Come back with me. Have some food and get your strength back.

She shook her head no, and for the first time in a few hours, felt the familiar sharp pain at the back of her head. “Fine,” she said, reluctantly agreeing to go with him.

“Good. Now let’s get your head right and get some food in you.”

They walked into the trees, her arm slung across his waist, and his arm around her shoulder, for support. They were quiet for a long time, with the exception of Abby’s occasional grunting when Robert helped her climb over a rock or a fallen tree.

He eventually broke the silence. “I will get you back on your feet, but I am not going to help you kill those people.”

Abby stopped and let go of him, snapping back, “I don’t need your help! I didn’t ask for your help.”

He chuckled a bit.

She asked, “Is that funny?”

“Well,” he said, “by my count, you would be dead twice over now without my help. So whether you have asked for it or not, it has turned out well enough for you so far.” He gestured for her to come close again so they could continue walking.

Abby knew he was right. As they walked through the trees, there was something familiar and safe about him, she thought.

“I know you are young, and you know everything, but let me offer you some of the best advice I can. Learn to accept help. Learn to trust the *right* people, and let the right people into your life. Keep the wrong ones out. You learn to do that, and you are going to be just fine.”

He gave her a squeeze around the shoulders, and she squeezed back. She gave him a little smile. “That sounds familiar,” she said. “Is that from a movie?”

He was looking off in the distance, “It is something you may have heard before.”

“Well, I think I was doing that. Letting the right people into my life, that is. Those people, Sara and that redhead Emily, they killed him.” She stopped and looked in his eyes. “They took him away from me. Whether you help me or not, I’m going to take their lives away from them.”

ABBY HAD BEEN STAYING with Robert for the past several days. They stood together on the hillside as he pointed out over the trees. “I will tell you how I always know where they are,” he said. “Late in the afternoon, just as the sun is going down, they light a fire. They almost always do. You have to be watching over the island when they light it.”

“Why is that?”

“Before it gets going, it will be very smoky. Once the fire is going pretty good, there is very little smoke. You watch and see where that smoke comes up through the trees, and that is where they are.” He pointed toward the northeast. “That is where they had been for the last few weeks.” He then pointed toward the beach where Abby had launched the raft, where the sun was starting to dip low in the sky. “That is where they have been for the past few days.”

Abby nodded. “That’s where our camp was set up. Do you think they have been staying there?”

“Why not?” he said. “You had a shelter, food, and wood. You said they were hurt, so they probably did not want to hike back through the trees. That is probably exactly where they are.”

Abby was pacing. Over the past few days, she ate good meals, gained back her strength, and was starting to feel anxious. She was feeling fit and unstoppable. It was time for her to move on, and they

both knew it.

“I cannot help you,” he said.

“I’m not asking you to. Just don’t get in my way.”

“I will not stop you either. I will not interfere with the will of another, even if I do not agree with it.”

“That’s all I can ask,” she said.

They stood watching the sky for a few minutes. As the sun got lower, the sky turned brilliant shades of orange, purple and pink near the horizon.

“I should go,” she said. “You said I would have the best view from up at the summit.”

“That you will,” he sighed.

“Thanks for everything.”

“Abby, please be careful out there.”

She studied his face. He was older than she was, probably by about thirty years, in his early fifties. He was in great shape, though. His body rivaled her youth in its appearance, but he wore those years in the wrinkles around his eyes. At this moment, they looked deeper than she had seen them before. He was looking at her with the concern of a father.

“Don’t worry, I will,” she said, standing on her toes and kissing him on the cheek.

Abby made short work going up the side of the mountain. Dusk was coming, and she did not want to miss the smoke and spend the night sleeping in the open for nothing. She could not help but let her

mind wander to Eric, thinking of the last time she had come this way. They had passed right through here together. Now he was gone.

That was the first time Tom and his band of crazies had found them. She knew she did not have to worry about them too much this time. When they surprised them the first time, it had been six of them against Abby and Eric. There had been three men and three women. All the men were dead now. At least she assumed that Tom had not survived. She liked her chances against the women. Over the past few weeks, Abby had discovered that she was a formidable fighter in her own right. She had already done plenty of damage in dire circumstances against strong and healthy adversaries.

Now the odds were one against three. However, of those three, one was half blind and hobbling around on a broken leg, at best. Abby had never bothered to figure out that one's name. She had already taken out Sara once, and who knew if she could even see straight with the broken nose that Abby left her with the last time they met.

The only healthy one was the redhead, Emily. From the little time that she had spent around her, Abby sensed that she actually seemed pretty meek. She did not know how she had played into Eric's killing, given that they had disappeared shortly after she had come on the scene. However, back at their camp, she never said a word, and did not put up a fight when Abby flipped her on her back. She would be easy. Sara was scrappy, though. Abby had trouble deciding which one she should take care of first.

She had covered the distance in record time. It was a good thing, too, because the sun would be setting in just a little while. She

found a perch on top of a large boulder where she sat to wait for the smoke to appear, telling her where her prey would be. She felt the back of her head. It was still tender to the touch, but her headaches had just about completely subsided over the past couple days.

Staring out at the tops of the trees that led toward the ocean, she let her mind drift off. She found herself running from her faceless enemy again. She was scared this time, but not for herself. She was trying to protect someone very important. Whoever she was trying to protect was also holding her in place, like an anchor. It was as though she was chained to this faceless man. He hurt her, but she could not leave. She could not even protect herself. Her dream was interrupted by a thud when she hit the ground, having fallen off of the boulder.

Standing, Abby worked out her shoulder and shook off her disturbing dream. She looked out over the trees to find that dusk had passed. Save for a few wisps of light on the horizon, she was staring into darkness. *Damn it.* She sat and took a piece of fruit from the bag that Robert had sent her with. She ate her small, raw supper while brainstorming, trying to figure out what to do next. Hike back down and spend the night with Robert again?

No, she would set up camp here. She considered lighting a small fire, as it would get pretty cool tonight, but decided that she did not want to chance the orange glow giving her away. Plus, she remembered feeling the empty sheath on her right leg, she did not have her knife and flint anymore. Last time she saw it, it was in Sara's hand. She did not want to think about that.

Not that a fire would necessarily give her away. No one was

looking for her, or would even know where to look. The idea struck her that she did, in fact, know where to look. The woman she was looking for would not have the same concerns about lighting a fire. They would not be worried about the orange glow giving them away. As far as they knew, the only person who would be looking for them was on a raft in the middle of the ocean. Maybe they should be worried.

If they were down at her camp, they would probably light a large fire to contend with the cool breeze coming off the water. She would likely be able to see the glow in the treetops once it was dark enough. It was just a matter of waiting. She climbed her boulder again, but after a few minutes worried that she might doze off and fall a second time. So she sat on the ground, leaning against it and waited for complete darkness to come.

While she waited, she thought. She was happy that she had kissed Eric, and was glad that she had come to know him. She was furious that he had been taken from her. Thinking about how she would go about killing the ones responsible, she almost started to feel bad for them. Emily would be quick, she decided, and first. No doubt the redhead would be in the best condition of the three of them. She would take her time with the other two, though. It would be slow and painful. They would feel every ounce of pain they had caused Abby. They would feel it tenfold.

Darkness came in the form of a moonless night, though the faint glow on the horizon told her that the moon would come eventually. Looking up, Abby saw more stars than she had ever seen

in her life. It had been decades since you could stand on the south coast of California, look up, and see more than a handful of stars. What she was seeing now was astounding. It did not even appear real to her.

Looking out to the water, her eyes followed the coastline to the area where she and Eric had set up camp. The tall trees and the distance prevented her from seeing the actual beach, but she knew where it was. She watched for the slightest flicker or glow in the treetops, any indication at all that the women were set up there. She scanned the area back and forth, but saw nothing. For ten minutes, twenty minutes, a half hour, she kept hoping, but saw nothing.

Damn it. She hurled a rock through the air toward the trees. If she had not fallen asleep she would have seen the smoke, wherever it was, and the three of them would be on their way to dead by now. She climbed her boulder again, and stood, making herself as tall as possible. The top of her head was the absolute highest point on the island at the moment.

Remembering that Robert had told her that their former camp had been to the northeast, she scanned that area, too. She quickly looked over that entire section of the island and saw nothing. Slowly, she looked it over again. She was trying to see every inch of every tree. Still nothing. Closing her eyes, she breathed slowly. Her heart was pumping hard, her anger starting to get the best of her.

Opening her eyes, she immediately saw a bright orange glow dancing on the treetops about one mile straight down the mountain from where she stood. "Gotcha."

Abby hopped down from the boulder. It was dark, but her eyes were completely adjusted, and she could see well enough to make it down the mountain to the tree line. Once there, she would have to move slowly. *That's fine*, she thought. *It is still early*. She was full of rage, but she was not stupid. She was not about to storm into the camp while the three of them were sitting around, awake. She would wait until the middle of the night when they were all sleeping. That was when she would make her move. That was when they would pay for their crimes.

AFTER SEVERAL HOURS spent tripping over rocks and through the trees, Abby finally found her way to their camp. She watched the area for a long time. She had been sitting there crouched in the trees for what seemed like an eternity. So far, she had not seen any type of movement. It had been over a week since she had floated away on that raft and watched Eric die, and not for a moment had she stopped thinking about her revenge. It was almost surreal to finally be so close.

The camp was set up in a small clearing, and there was a large lean-to shelter on the far side, much like the one that she had built by the beach. Almost directly in the middle of the clearing was a stone-lined fire pit, and there was a small metal pot sitting on a stone next to the dying fire. Whatever was in there smelled pretty good. Of course, having been weeks since she had sat in a proper kitchen for a real home-cooked meal, just about anything smelled good. She had actually come to enjoy Robert's rabbit stew though. She might even try that at home, if she ever got out of here.

How to go about this? she wondered. She did not have a weapon. No doubt she could find a thick stick of some sort that she could use as a club, but she was not about to go storming into the shelter against three women, armed only with a stick. She had no idea if they were even there. Would they all be there? What might they have in there with them? She reminded herself that she was here to kill, not get

killed.

Mesmerized by the dying fire, she was struck with an idea. She could smoke them out. It would be simple. Light a branch on fire, preferably one that was nice and dry, with lots of leaves on it. She could place that at the base of their lean-to, and within minutes their shelter should go up in flames.

There would be one of two outcomes from there. They would either come running out to escape the fire, where Abby would be waiting for them. Or they would stay inside, choke to death on the smoke in their sleep and burn in the blaze. Either option was fine with Abby, though she did hope that at least Sara would come running out.

It did not take long for her to find a fallen branch covered in dry leaves. She selected one that was about the length of her arm. It appeared that it had been lying on the ground for quite some time. The leaves even crackled in her hand a bit when she squeezed them. It would be perfect.

She stood silent and still, staring at the shelter. The only problem with her plan was that she would have to cross open ground. The fire was in the center of the camp, and that was where she had to go if she wanted to light the branch. At this point, she had been watching the camp for hours, with absolutely no sign of life. She did not even hear any noise coming from the shelter. For all she knew, she was about to burn down a perfectly good – and empty – shelter.

Working up her courage was nearly effortless. She simply thought about Eric being cut down on the beach while she watched helplessly from the water. The woman – correction – the bitch

responsible for that was right in front of her. All she had to do was be ready to punch her in the throat when she came running out of the lean-to. The camp was, and had been, completely silent. They must be sleeping. Simple.

She carefully stepped from the trees, and was about three strides from the tree line when she caught a dark figure out of the corner of her eye. Abby's feet were swept out from under her while something pushed her from behind, slamming her chest into the ground and knocking the wind out of her. While she lay gasping for air, someone jumped on her back and wrapped her wrists and feet within seconds.

Whoever was on her back had gotten up. Abby rolled over to see a mane of thick red hair flickering by the fire light. It was Emily; the one Abby figured would not be a problem.

Abby hissed through her teeth, "Let me go. Just let me go. Let me kill the blond haired bitch, Sara. The one who killed Eric. Let me do that and I'll leave. You will never see me again."

The woman said nothing, but grabbed Abby by the arm and lifted her to her feet. Abby could not believe how strong the woman was. She very well could have been one of the hands that had grabbed her that first time they had a run in with Tom and his people.

Emily dragged her over toward the fire, despite Abby's best efforts to be counterproductive.

"This would be easier if you would untie my feet, you know. I can walk."

"It's better for us both this way. I don't want to hurt you, but I

will.”

“Why not? You people haven’t had a problem hurting me up to now.”

Emily sighed and spoke in a hushed voice. “Just shut up and listen.”

Abby scowled at her, “Make me.”

“So it’s going to be like that,” Emily observed. “Alright.” She forced her to sit down on a log by the fire. Emily tossed some more wood on the fire, then sat across from her at a distance.

They stared at each other. She thought about the last time they had seen each other around the fire, Abby having flipped her on her back and leaving her tied to the other woman. She would have described her as cute then. Now, any childish cuteness was gone. She was a woman on a mission.

Abby kept glancing over Emily’s shoulder, looking at the lean-to. She asked, “Is that where they are?”

“How did you get here?”

“On a raft. The same one I floated out on. Are they in there? The other women?”

“No. How did you get here in the first place?”

Abby did not answer.

“You just woke up here, on the beach, right? You were confused. You had no idea how you got here. You met up with Eric. You both noticed changes in yourselves, physical changes. You’re healthier than you should be. More fit. Right?”

Abby smiled, “Let me guess. The same thing happened to you?

Blah, blah, blah. Sara already gave me this whole speech to gain my trust.” She shook her head, “Fool me once, shame on you, but it’s not going to work a second time.”

“Alright, then, do you know why you’re here?”

“I don’t, but I aim to leave soon enough. I just need to wrap up some loose ends.”

“Well, let me tell you why *I’m* here, then. The United States has been fighting global terrorism for the past fifty years. Any country that really matters has nukes now. We’re never going to line up our forces against China or anyone else. That would be stupid for everyone involved. Everyone dies. The wars we are fighting are in cities, against a handful of terrorists.”

She watched Abby for a reaction. She had none.

Emily twirled her finger in the air, indicating everything around them. “This whole island is part of a government leadership program. They need the strongest leaders. People who can take charge and discipline a small group. It is a test. It is a test that is out of hand as far as the government is concerned. They can’t control us, and you were sent here to kill us and put a stop to it.” She stared hard at Abby.

After a few moments, Abby said, “That is the most asinine thing I have ever heard.”

“Is it?”

“It is. I’m not an assassin.”

“Then why the violence? Why try to take us out as soon as you met us?”

“Because you kidnapped us and tied us up. We had to defend

ourselves.”

Emily nodded. “That’s exactly what I said, too.”

“Huh?”

“I’m glad you agree. That whole leadership test theory was bullshit. I’ve been listening to it for nearly a year.”

“I’m sorry, you’re the one who was talking about some leadership program that the government sent me here to shut down. I did not bring that up.”

“I know, neither did I. That was Tom’s theory. He was a lunatic.”

“Excuse me?”

Emily went on. “Tom and I arrived at the same time. He seemed normal enough for the first day or so, but I could tell something wasn’t right. He said he had been in the military, but was vague on the details. He seemed to be something of a conspiracy theorist. There were others on the island already when we got here, like in your situation. He told me his theory one night. I had already suspected he was crazy, and he just confirmed it. I was glad that there were other people around. I didn’t exactly want to be alone with him, but that did not work out so well either.”

“Why is that?” Abby was definitely curious.

“He killed them all one night. Then it was just the two of us. He thought for sure that he had ‘passed’ the test. When no one came to congratulate him and assign him his new post, he got very confused. Eventually other people started to come to the island. He was very charismatic, and they all bought into the bullshit he was selling. Until

you guys.”

“It’s not that we never bought in, though it does sound ridiculous. He never explained his theory to us.”

Emily smiled. “You never gave him a chance. Instead, you tried to kill everyone. That’s when he decided that you were sent by the government to put an end to the program. Honestly, he has been a lunatic since the day I met him. When I saw that you had finally killed him, I was relieved. I didn’t have to be scared of him anymore.”

Abby was skeptical. “That’s really your story?”

Emily laughed, “I know, it sounds crazy. You have every right to think I’m just trying to trick you, but it’s the truth.”

They were quiet for a long time, listening to the crackling of the fire. Abby was looking at her feet, deep in thought. She considered Emily’s story. It made some sense when she thought it through. Abby shifted her shoulders uncomfortably.

“The other women – are they here?”

“No. You don’t have to worry about them.”

“So what do we do now?”

“That’s entirely up to you. I would like to trust each other. I would like to work together, or at least agree that we are not going to kill each other. There are very few people on this little outpost. It’s in our best interest to get along.”

“With Tom gone, I don’t have to worry about you? You’re not going try to avenge his death or anything?”

Emily laughed again. “I told you, I’m happy he’s gone. He was out of his mind. We are all better off without him around. Besides, if I

was going to avenge his death, why not just kill you now, while you're tied up? You are at my mercy."

Abby thought about that. It was true. She was very vulnerable at the moment, and Emily was plenty strong enough. Emily could easily kill her then and there. "Fair enough," Abby said. "I guess that is a reason to trust you a little bit. I'm not saying we're going to be best friends right now, but if you untie me, that would be a nice gesture," she smiled.

"As long as you see that we're on the same team. But do not make me hurt you."

"I won't."

Emily went to work on her feet. She had a knife, a fairly dull one. It took some effort, but she eventually cut through and freed Abby's feet. She stood behind Abby and worked on her hands, careful not to cut her. Once she freed her wrists, she placed her hand on Abby's shoulder, half expecting her to turn around and take a swing. "Same team," she reminded her.

"Same team," Abby repeated.

Emily moved in front of Abby, and they looked at each other. Emily felt awkward as Abby rubbed her wrists. "There is something else I need to tell you."

Abby spoke as if she didn't hear. Gesturing to the pot next to the fire she asked, "What's cooking?"

"That was dinner. Nothing extravagant. Are you hungry? I think we have a little bit left in there." Emily turned to the fire, leaning over to look into the pot.

Abby reached down and grabbed a fist-sized rock that lay at her feet. She leapt, closing the small gap between them, arcing her arm through the air to connect the stone with the back of Emily's skull. A split second before impact, a large hand came from behind, seizing her wrist, stopping it in mid-air.

Abby was shocked. Looking up, she locked eyes with Eric.

ERIC LOOKED at Emily. “I told you to wait for me when she showed up.”

“I tried to wait for you, but she was coming into the camp. I had to do something.”

“Hide, that’s what you should have done. You nearly got yourself killed.” He was still holding Abby’s shocked hand mid-air.

“I thought I had it handled,” Emily said.

Abby interrupted “Hey!”

They both turned to her.

She spoke quietly. “You’re alive?” Abby said this more as a question than a statement. She stared into Eric’s eyes as tears began rolling down her soft cheeks.

“I am,” he smiled.

She buried her face in his chest, squeezing him hard, holding him as close as she could. Through her tears she inhaled his scent, drinking him in.

“It’s alright, Abby. It’s real. I’m here.” He stroked her hair.

When she finally calmed down, she pulled away, drying her face with her hands. “You don’t seem surprised to see me?”

He laughed, “I never doubted that you would show up. I knew you would be fine.”

She gestured toward Emily, who had been standing by, watching the scene unfold. “Can you tell me about this? Why are we

friends with her?”

“She’s alright,” he said. “Trust me.”

“I trust you. It’s her I don’t trust.” Looking at Emily, she squeezed her arm around Eric’s waist, claiming him as her own. “I don’t know what she told you, but I don’t believe it. It’s Sara all over again. How do we know she’s not just playing another game? Buying time until the other two are healthy, then they come after us.”

“Trust me, she is not going back to the other women.”

“How do you know that?”

He looked at her hard. “Because they’re dead. The three of us are the only ones here Abby.”

“They’re dead, and she’s not going to hold that against us? Revenge is a powerful emotion. Avenging your death is the only thing that kept me going out there.”

“She is not going to hold anything against you,” he said. “We didn’t kill them.”

“Who did?”

Emily finally spoke. “I did.”

“I told you she could be trusted,” Eric said.

Abby was shocked. “You killed them? Why?”

“The story I told you was true, every bit of it. I have been scared of Tom and trying to find a way out for a long time. The others, they... they bought into it. Sara was furious and hell-bent on killing you guys.”

“I know,” Abby said. “I saw you both attack Eric on the beach.”

“You were pretty far out on the water,” Eric said. “Sara

attacked me. If Emily hadn't shown up when she did, I would probably be dead."

Abby thought about it. It was true that she saw Emily running up to them, but she never saw what happened. That was about the time that she had jumped into the water in her fruitless effort to swim in. "But I saw Sara stab you. You were on the ground. I thought you were dead." Her eyes began to well up with the memory.

Eric lifted his shirt to reveal a very long cut across his ribs. "She just grazed me. Hurt like a son of a bitch. I went down, but I was all right. I would not have been for long, if Em here hadn't come along."

"This is all happening so fast." She turned to Emily, "I tied you up to the one with the broken leg after you attacked me."

"First, I wasn't attacking you, I didn't even know you were there. If I remember right, you jumped out from behind a rock and flipped me like a pancake."

"You're right. I thought I had killed you at first."

"Thanks for that."

"So what happened?"

"I wasn't dead, obviously. I wasn't even unconscious. I just figured if I got up you *would* kill me. So I stayed on the ground and let you tie me up. I saw what you did to the men at the gravesite. I figured you were going for Tom and Sara next. The woman you left me tied to, Jessica, I never liked her. Killing her was doing her a favor."

"I thought these people were your friends?"

"No, I needed them to survive. I certainly was not about to try

to get away from them just to have them hunt me down and kill me. When I saw how you handled yourself when we first grabbed you, that's when I knew I could finally get out. I just needed to join up with you."

"What happened on the beach?"

"She saved my life," Eric said.

"How?"

"She came running onto the beach, screaming that Tom was still alive and needed help. Sara went with her. They just left me there. I realized I was not in as bad a shape as I thought. I hightailed it into the trees to watch. I could not believe he was alive, but I couldn't figure out what angle she was playing. I found out when Sara leaned over Tom to listen for his breath, and she, well..."

They all looked at each other. Abby was trying to process everything.

"I want to see the bodies," she said.

"You don't believe me?" Eric was confused.

"I just... I'm having a hard time wrapping my head around this."

"Well, that's going to be tough."

"You already buried them?" Abby understood. "Just show me where. Maybe that will be enough."

Eric and Emily shared a look.

"What?" Abby said.

Emily spoke. "We didn't bury them."

"Then why can't I see them then?"

“They’re gone.”

“Gone where?”

“We don’t know.”

Abby stood looking at them both, “What the hell is going on?”
She looked nervously at Eric, who held up his hands to reassure her.

“I... I think Emily can explain it better than I can.”

Abby looked at Emily, “Well, go ahead then.”

“I don’t understand it myself. Just keep an open mind, alright?”

“Just tell me what’s going on.”

Emily began, “I don’t understand everything about this island. I don’t understand why we are here. I don’t understand how we got here. I don’t understand why more people keep showing up, but no one ever rescues us. And I don’t think you understand that either, do you?”

“You have been here a year,” Abby said. “I’m going on a month. I haven’t figured it out any better than you have.”

“Alright. Well, the strangest thing I don’t understand is what happens to the people who die. They just disappear.”

“Are you fucking with me?”

“No, I guarantee you that I’m not. Remember how I told you that Tom killed those people when we first got here? Well, I freaked out and took off. He found me in a couple of hours and brought me back to the camp. When we got back, they were all gone. Trust me, I saw how brutally he mangled them. There was no way any of them were alive and just walked off. But they were gone.”

“So how do you explain it?”

"I can't. But every time someone is really sick, really hurt, or dead, they disappear."

Abby looked at Eric. "What do you think about this?"

"I think that I don't get it either, but it seems to be the truth. We dragged Tom and Sara away from our camp into the trees. Figured we would bury them after my side healed up in a few days. When we woke up the next day, they were gone. I also know those men we left at the gravesite were dead. No way either one of them was still alive the way we left them. When we got back to their camp a few days ago, they were gone, too."

"What about the one with the broken leg?"

"I never saw her," he said, "but I'm inclined to believe what Emily said."

"One of the women who was here when I got to the island told me about this," Emily said. "She said that she had not seen it herself, but there was another woman who had been here longer than her and told her about it. So, this is third hand, but the woman had told her that someone had fallen off a cliff and got killed. It took them the better part of a day to hike down the mountain to get the body. When they got there, it was gone. They thought maybe the person had survived, but he never showed up again."

"This is crazy," Abby said.

"It is. But she told me something else, too. She said that some guy had broken his arm; the bone was right through the skin. It was pretty bad, and after a couple of days, he started with a fever. They figured he must have an infection, and were pretty sure he was going

to die. He got real bad over the next couple of days, to the point that they had a twenty-four hour watch over him. She was with him one night, and fell asleep. She woke up, and he was gone, but she heard something in the trees. She went out, and there were men dressed all in black carrying him away.”

“Who were they?”

“She had no idea. It was not the men that were with them. She said she followed them at a distance until they got to a cove, where she lost them. It was the middle of the night, and she had a real hard time finding her way back. She told the others what had happened, and they set out to find them. The problem was that she could not find her way back to the cove. Everything had been dark when she followed them before, so it was a dead end. She said another woman disappeared. She seemed to be perfectly healthy, but was about seven months pregnant, they figured. They never found her either.”

Abby thought about the story. The part about the cove stuck out to her. She had floated completely around the island on her raft. Granted, she had not been lucid the entire time, but she only remembered seeing one cove during her trip. The one that she eventually wound up paddling into. It was on the north side of the island, shielded by tall trees all around it. It was one hell of a hike through some rough terrain and could be easy to miss if you were looking for it on land. It was only clearly visible from the water.

“What do you think the cove is all about?”

“I don’t know,” Emily said. “But it seems there must be other people here snatching up the sick and the dead. I can’t figure out why,

but that's the only thing that makes sense. Maybe this cove is where they are. I don't know."

Abby thought about Robert. He had been on the island for a long time, and obviously knew where the cove was. *Maybe he knows something more?* She nearly voiced this thought, however she remembered that earlier Eric had said that the three of them – Abby, Eric, and Emily – were the only three people left on the island. At the time, knowing that Robert was alive and well, she nearly corrected him. However she realized that Eric could be concealing Robert from Emily for now, so she didn't. She decided to wait until she could speak with Eric about it before she mentioned Robert in front of her.

"I've been there," she said. Abby recounted the story of the cove where she had landed the raft.

Emily asked, "Do you think you can get us back there?"

"I think so. I was in rough shape at the time, but I remember how to get there. It's on the north side of the island. There's lots of heavy vegetation around it, but I can get us there."

Eric spoke. "Let's do it first thing in the morning. Let's figure this thing out. If there are other people here, maybe they know how to get off this rock."

They all agreed. At dawn, they would pack up camp and set out for the cove.

Emily excused herself and retired to the shelter, leaving Eric and Abby alone by the glow of the fire.

"I'm so happy you're alive," Abby said, squeezing him tightly. "I'm so happy to be back together." She kissed him, soft on the lips.

He smiled. "There was never a doubt in my mind that we would be."

She whispered, "Does she know about Robert?"

Eric shook his head no. "I was keeping that one in my back pocket. Just in case. I figure if she isn't who she says she is and I have to cut bait, I want the option to head up the hill and stay with him for a while."

"You're a smart one."

"Naw, just practical."

Abby told him about how Robert had found her when she floated into the cove, brought her back to his camp and got her back on her feet again. "I don't know what I would have done without him. I could barely walk when he pulled me out of the water."

"What was he doing there?" Eric wondered.

"I don't know. I never asked, and he never offered. I guess it was like when he helped us the first time. He showed up at the right place, when we needed him."

Eric nodded his head, "I wonder if we'll be seeing him again anytime soon?"

ABBY WAS DREAMING of the faceless man again. She was not the one being chased this time, though. She was chasing him. He had something she needed. Something she had hidden, but he had found. She got close, but could never catch him. She reached out to grab him, but her hand came up with nothing but air. She woke up, breathing hard.

Eric was sitting up watching her, the early morning sunlight filtering through the shelter opening. "You all right?"

Abby nodded her head yes. "I'm fine. Do we have any water around here?"

He reached over and tossed her a small flask. "Emily left to get some more for the trip."

Abby drained the flask without offering him any. "Sorry."

"Don't worry about it, there's plenty more. This is a good spot. There's a stream ten minutes from here. Em will be back soon."

"Em?"

"Emily."

"I know who you mean. I didn't know you were on cute nickname status yet."

Eric laughed. "It just sounds right. *Ab* doesn't sound like a good nickname, but I can call you that if you want."

"No, I'm good."

They stood and stretched. Eric began packing some food into a

satchel. "You should trust her, you know. I know it's weird, but she's one of us now."

"I get that part."

"Then what's the problem?"

"I was just thinking. You and I have been here for what, a month?"

"There about."

"So, my point is, I'm already feeling like I'm losing my mind. If she's really been here for a year, how is she not totally screwed up?"

Eric thought about that a moment. "She was part of a group of six when we got here, right? Five of them are dead. She killed two of them. That's pretty screwed up to me, don't you think?"

Abby agreed. "That's what I'm saying. How can I trust someone like that?"

"Because she killed them to *help* us. I get it that she was only with them out of fear in the first place. We are her saviors. She wants to be with us and killed to make that happen. She may be screwed up, but I'm willing to trust her for now. Don't forget, I've been with her for a week, and she seems alright."

"I guess good people can get into bad situations. Sometimes they have got to take extreme measures to get out, right?"

"That happens all the time. Some folks are stronger than others. Some get sucked in and never get out. Some rise to the occasion, get stronger, and overcome what they thought they couldn't."

She nodded her head in agreement. "That does happen, doesn't it?"

“So, can you at least trust me, to trust her? I know this is all a shock to you, but for the last week when you were MIA, I’ve gotten to know her. She is one of the good ones. One of us, and we’re better off working with her than against her. If she goes nuts, we can cut her loose. Deal?”

Abby got close to Eric. “I’ll make any deal you want right now. I thought you were dead.” She bit her lip. “I know we haven’t known each other long, but I feel like we have spent a lifetime together. Before I got here, before I met you, I can barely remember what life was like.”

“You were in school, weren’t you?”

“I was, but what was I going to do with it? I was mostly just hanging out with the wrong people, making bad decisions. I’m stronger now. Not just physically, but emotionally. You’re part of that. You are different from anyone I have been with. I will trust you, but you have to make me a promise.”

“What’s that?”

“When we get off this island, I want to be together. Promise me that. I’m not saying we get married or anything, but we have been through so much. We can’t just go our separate ways.”

“Of course. I was afraid I lost you once, and I’m not going to let that happen again. You’re going to be stuck with me for a long time. Hey, who knows, if we’re ever getting out of here anyway, right? We don’t have to wait until we get off this rock to make any promises. Let’s be together now, and if we ever do get out of here, why change a good thing?”

They kissed. She ran her hand up to his chest. He winced in pain when she grazed the scar on his ribs, "I'm sorry!"

"Don't worry about it." He lifted his shirt. "Emily did a great job patching me up."

A few seconds later, Emily arrived, the solar bag slung over her shoulder, filled with enough water for the three of them. "I did, didn't I?"

"I'm impressed," Abby said.

"I was a nurse. Well, I guess I still am. Before I wound up here, that's what I did."

Abby closely examined the scar for the first time. "Are those stitches? How?" She looked at Emily.

"I know what I'm doing."

Abby still looked confused.

"She has a *really* good first aid kit," Eric said.

"Where did you get that?"

"It was next to me in a satchel when I woke up," she said.

"Like your knife," Eric said. "That reminds me," he reached into the satchel and carefully pulled out Abby's knife.

She held her hand to her mouth to quiet her trembling lip when she saw it.

Shaking her head no, she held her hand up to stop him from handing it to her. She turned away, leaving Eric confused. "Please, put it away," she said. "The last time I saw that..." her voice trailed off.

Emily pointed to his scar.

Eric got it. "Abby, it scratched me, barely. I'm fine."

“I thought it killed you. I thought *my* knife killed you.”

“But it didn’t.” He put his hand on her shoulder, turning her around and holding it up. “Look, it’s clean. No blood. It gave me a scratch, sure, but it saved our ass plenty of times.” He slid it into its sheath, kneeling down and strapping it around her thigh. “Don’t take it out if you don’t want to, but I feel better knowing you have it.”

Abby sighed. She had to admit that she had not felt right without it for the past week. It had become part of her while she has been here. “It’s going to take us half a day to hike to the cove. We should get going.”

Eric stood up. “Alright! Now we’re talkin’.”

They gathered their few supplies and began to head north, cutting through the trees. Abby led the way. She was sure of where they were going. It was easiest to go around the mountain than up and over. She led them toward the water, and they followed the coastline for a while.

Abby spoke, “That was an interesting theory Tom had.”

“Tom was insane,” Emily said flatly.

“Why do you think we are here, then?”

Eric speculated. “It could be a government thing, I guess. Why don’t any of us remember coming here? You have been here longer than us, Em. Any thoughts?”

“Sure, I’ve thought about it a lot. Doesn’t mean I’ve come up with anything that makes sense, though.” She paused. “I’ll tell you what I did figure out a long time ago. We can guess and speculate all we want, but nothing we come up with as far as *why* we are here

changes the fact that we are here. I figured out a long time ago that I had better concentrate on surviving, instead of worrying how I got here.”

“Sounds familiar,” Abby said.

“Before I got here, I had nothing going on,” Eric said. “Just working construction since high school. Living in a crappy apartment with some loser buddies. I’ll be the first to say, life here hasn’t been a walk in the park, but being here, in this beautiful place, meeting you two... I feel like my life is better for it.”

As they moved between the trees to go back inland, Emily asked Abby, “So you have always been a hiker, have you?”

“No, this is a new thing.”

“I just figured, since you seem to know what you’re doing. I thought you must have some sort of background running around in the woods or something.”

“Not really. I mean, when I was a girl I used to go camping with my family. My grandfather and I spent time hiking the trails in the woods, but I’m certainly no expert. I spent the last four years in college, and the few weeks before I got here I was just working some temp jobs.”

Emily asked, “What inspired you to go back to school?”

“What do you mean?”

“Well, obviously, you’re not the typical fresh-out-of-college age. I was just curious why you went back.”

Abby laughed. “I’m twenty-two. How old do you think I am?”

Emily raised an eyebrow. “Twenty-two?”

“Yep.”

After thinking for a second, she said, “I’ll believe that, I guess. I’m twenty-five, but no one believed me either when I told them.”

Abby quickly counted herself among the non-believers. No way Emily was twenty-five. She would more likely believe that Emily was *thirty*-five. Not that it really mattered anyway.

Eric said, “Well, I think ya’ll look great, I don’t care what your age.”

Abby asked, “So we have a construction worker, a graduate with a fairly useless degree, and a nurse. Anything we have in common?”

“Doesn’t seem that way,” Eric said.

“I guess no clues there, then.”

They hiked the rest of the afternoon in relative silence. No one had anything interesting to say, and Abby was leading the charge at a fairly quick pace. When they starting hiking through the rough terrain that surrounded the cove, the other two had their hands full just trying to keep up as Abby easily went up an over the rocks and fallen trees.

“It should be just up here.” Abby pointed to a small gap in the trees where the crystal blue ocean water was visible in the distance. “Is there anything else anyone told you about this place?”

“No,” Emily said. “I told you everything that woman told me. She followed the men here. She watched as they went in. As far as she knew, they never came out.”

Abby pondered that statement. “I wonder if we will?”

THEY TURNED A CORNER, and the cove opened up in front of them. It was beautiful, and surrounded by lush vegetation. The white sand was only visible for a few feet from the tree line, rapidly leading into the clear water. About two or three yards from the edge, there was a very steep drop off. The water was so clear, the bottom was visible well into the center of the channel, but they could not guess how far down the bottom was. The cove was small, maybe thirty-five yards from one side to the other. It came in from the ocean approximately the same distance, until the water disappeared into a massive cavern.

Standing at the edge of the water, they tried to peer into the cavern, but saw nothing. The water appeared to be flowing in that direction. As Abby knew from experience, it was a very strong current. The inside of the cavern was pitch black. They could see into it a bit, but could not see where the end was. A bit farther down the small beach, the raft that had kept Abby alive was still washed up on the shore. A little part of her was very happy to see it.

Emily observed, "There's really not much to see, is there?"

"Not a whole lot," Abby agreed.

No one said it, but they were all thinking the same thing – *what do we do now?*

Emily did not take her eyes off of the cavern. "I say we go in and explore."

“But we don’t know what’s in there,” Eric said.

“Well how else are we going to find out? Plus, we know what’s out here. We know that there’s nothing or no one out here helping us to get off this island. At least the unknown offers some hope.”

“Look at that current though. I don’t like it.”

“Then you can stay out here,” Emily said, ready to go in.

“He’s got a point,” Abby said. “I’ve been in that water. That’s a strong current, and we don’t know where it ends up in there.”

“What’s the alternative?” Emily asked. “We just stay on this island forever? If there is some unexplored corner that might offer me a way out, I want to find it.”

A voice came from behind them, “Why are you so eager to get off the island? It’s not a bad place.”

They turned. Abby somehow knew he would show up. She took care of introducing Robert to a shocked Emily. “Emily, this is Robert.”

“Who is this guy?” Emily said.

“He’s a friend,” Abby said. “He’s been here a long time and knows his way around.”

He nodded to Emily. “I have seen you around the island, though you have not seen me. I assume that these two have filled you in a bit.”

“No, they haven’t.” She looked to Eric. He could not tell if she was angry or hurt, maybe both, “Why didn’t you tell me there was someone else on the island?”

Eric immediately felt guilty. Emily had trusted him, and had killed for him. He should have told her. He shrugged, “He’s a private

guy, and I wasn't sure he wanted you to know about him."

"Eric's right," Robert said. "I like to keep to myself, and let's face it, the group you have been running around with for the past year was not one I wanted to get involved with."

Emily conceded, "Well, you have a point there."

"I have made this island my home for many years," Robert continued. "It is a great place. It may not have all the comforts of the modern world, but that is not necessarily a bad thing, you know."

"Except that a week ago there were nine people on this island, and today there are four. It's not looking like the most hospitable retreat I've been to," Emily said.

"Good point," Robert agreed. "But we all know what the problem was, and now he is gone. I am certain the four of us can get on quite well together, until you figure out a safe way off the island. If that is what you want to do."

Abby pointed to the cavern, "What do you know about what's in there?"

"I know that whoever goes in there never comes out. That being the case, I would advise against being the next one to go in."

"So what if we do?" Emily said. "You might think of this as your home, but you're not going to stop me."

"No, I will not. I will tell you what I think. I will tell you I have seen folks swim in there before, and I have never seen a single one of them return. I will tell you that you are an idiot for thinking that you will be the first. But I will not interfere. If that is what you have decided to do, that is what you are going to do."

“You seem really into the whole free will thing,” Abby observed.

“How so?”

“Yesterday, just about this same time, when I was planning to go off and kill this one,” she gestured toward Emily, “you said the same thing. You didn’t agree with what I was going to do, but you weren’t going to stop me.”

“You are right,” he said. “I would be remiss if I did not give you some advice, but I am not going to stand in the way of what you have set your mind to.” He winked at Emily, “And aren’t you glad you did not wind up killing her?”

He looked at Eric who had been quiet. “I have been here for a long time. I have seen a lot of things. I could not live with myself if I did not try to provide you with some guidance. Do you think it is a good idea to go in there?”

Eric looked at the two women and shook his head. “No sir, I can’t say that I do.”

Emily was frustrated, “I really don’t care what you two think.” Emily looked at Robert. “I’ve been here a long time, too. I’ve seen a lot of shit. Guess what? I’m tired of it. I want out, and I think the answer is in there,” she pointed toward the cavern.

Robert agreed. “You have been here a long time. It has been just about a year since I first saw you and Tom wandering through the trees, probably a few weeks shy of that. You are a survivor. You are still here. You are still standing. You have outlived everyone else since you have arrived here. Why not keep doing so?”

“I’m not interested in just surviving anymore. I’m interested in living, and I’ve done all the living on this rock that I’m going to.” She wrapped her red hair around itself in a ponytail.

Robert asked, “Is there nothing I can say to talk you out of this?”

“Not unless you’re going to tell me you know another way off this rock.” She waited, staring at him.

“No, I do not know another way, but this is not it.”

“Well, let’s hope you’re wrong. Wish me luck.” Emily waded into the water until it came up to her hips, “It’s beautiful,” she said. With a little jump, she began swimming out into the channel. It was obvious from shore how strong the current was once she had traveled several yards toward the center of the channel. She was not swimming hard, but was quickly being carried toward the opening of the cavern.

As Emily got closer to the opening, Abby yelled out, “What do you see?”

“It’s dark,” Emily called back. “I don’t see anything.”

Abby looked at Robert and noticed his eyes were a bit glassed over, as though he were going to cry. This surprised her, seeing as though he had just met Emily. She put her hand on his shoulder. “Don’t worry. She’ll be fine.”

He shook his head. “I cannot be here. I cannot be a part of this.”

“Leave then, but this is happening.”

They watched as she got closer. She was nearly at the mouth of the cavern.

“Anything yet?” Eric called out.

“There’s a ledge over here on the far side. I’m going to head for that.”

“See?” Abby said to Robert, nudging his arm. “There’s a ledge. She’s going to be fine.”

Emily would be out of their view in seconds. She began trying to swim against the current, back out. “The current is really strong right in the center,” she yelled. She was strong, but she was no match for the current that was carrying her in. When she disappeared into the darkness, they could still hear her futile splashing echoing from inside of the cavern.

Abby yelled, “Can you get to the ledge?”

They listened and heard nothing but splashing.

Eric yelled, “Em, are you OK?”

Nothing.

“Can you swim to the ledge?”

The splashing stopped, and they heard nothing for a moment. Looking at each other they wondered what had happened. Abby was getting nervous.

“Em!” she yelled out.

“I CAN’T!” they heard her yell from inside, “TOO STRONG!”

Abby looked at Eric and Robert, panicked. Robert’s face stood impassive. His eyes were focused on something far off in the distance while he mouthed a silent prayer.

Eric was paralyzed with indecision.

“Screw it,” Abby said. She turned and dove into the water, fully

clothed.

“Abby!” Eric called.

She never turned to look at him. Instead, she swam full steam straight across the center of the channel, almost clear to the other side; only then did she turn toward the cavern. “Abby!” He began tearing off his shirt, preparing to jump in himself.

“No!” Robert grabbed him by both arms. “No, Eric, I will not allow you to go in there.”

“What do you suggest we do then?”

Robert roared with a mix of rage and sadness, “Damn it, what is wrong with you people!”

Eric shook him off. “I’m not going to just stand here and let them die. Do you have any ideas?”

“If you jump in, all three of you are dead, Eric. Dead!”

“Unless you have a better plan, I’m going in.” Eric turned to jump into the water.

“Wait!” Robert stared at the back of his head. “Damn it.” He struggled with the words, “Damn it. There is another way in. Follow me. Fast!” He turned and ran into the trees.

Eric grabbed his shirt and ran to follow him.

IN THE CAVERN, Abby tried not to struggle against the current. Instead, she attempted to work with it. She had swam past the center of the channel before she entered the cavern, hoping that would give her a better chance to make it to the ledge on the far side. The current toward the edge was not as strong as the center, but it was still formidable. Her legs kicked and she pumped her arms until they burned near her shoulders. As hard as she tried, she could not get close enough to grab the ledge.

Her fingertips brushed the rock occasionally, but that was as close as she could get. She called out, “Emily! Em! Can you hear me?” She listened and heard nothing but the rushing water. As she was being pulled along, she felt as if she were being pulled down. Her fears were confirmed when her head dipped under the water momentarily.

She kicked her muscles into high gear and pumped her arms and legs with every ounce of her strength, trying to make it to the ledge. It was so close now. Her hands slapped against the face of the rock, but still she could not get a grip. The edge that she would have to grab onto was just a little too high. It would be out of her reach even if the current were not dragging her down.

Finally, her head went fully underwater. As she was pulled diagonally down and across the rock face, her hands scrambled to

grab onto anything they could in the dark. The problem was that the face of the rock was as smooth as glass.

Suddenly, her left hand bounced off of something jutting from the wall. She instinctively reached out with her right hand and latched onto it, then quickly grabbed on with her other hand to keep her from being swept away. The moving current was still pulling her legs behind her, but she held on with a death grip. Whatever she was holding, felt like a bar. Making sure her grip was tight with her right hand, she let go with her left to feel around the wall. About a foot above was another bar-like object jutting out.

It felt the same as what she was holding onto, and seemed just as secure to the wall. There was no time for debate; her lungs were starting to ache. She grabbed on with her left hand and pulled herself up. Repeating the same steps, she found another bar above this one. Could this be a ladder? There was no time to think about it. She repeated the process, feeling, grabbing, and pulling herself up. Her lungs were burning, and she desperately wanted to take a breath. Her shoulders felt as though they were being ripped from her joints by the mighty current trying to tear her away.

At last her face broke the surface of the water, and she sucked in a lungful of air. Wrapping her arms around the bar, she clung on for her life. All around her was nothing but darkness. The light at the entrance to the cavern was gone. She knew she could not hold on here indefinitely. She also knew she could not go back down. Up was the only option.

She began climbing up. It was a struggle at first, as she had to

rely entirely on her upper body strength to hoist herself out of the water. It became significantly easier once her feet came out of the water, and she could use her legs, as well. After a few steps, the bars disappeared, and instead her hands found a flat, horizontal, hard, wet surface. She felt around with her arms and hands. This must be it. She pulled herself up to the ledge, rolled over and flopped on her back.

When her breathing finally slowed, she sat up. There was the sound of a waterfall. Not a pleasant trickling sound, but a massive rushing sound, as though she were in a room near Niagara Falls. She yelled out for Emily, but she could barely hear her own voice over the roar of rushing water.

From her seated position, she felt the floor all around her. Her hands found the wall next to her. As far as she could reach, she felt the damp rock of the floor. Abby started to stand up, then paused. It occurred to her that if she were to take a wrong step, or slip, she would likely fall right back into the water below. She could not see the water, but its deafening rush made her keenly aware that falling in would result in certain death.

Still, she could not sit in the darkness forever. She thought about Eric. She was sure he would come in after her when she did not come out, despite whatever protest Robert would mount. Odds were that he would not be as lucky as she had been. She had to act quickly.

Standing, her legs shook with a mixture of adrenaline and fatigue. She put one hand against the wall for balance, and blindly reached ahead with the other. In this manner, she began shuffling across the floor, always keeping one hand on the wall. Staying close to

it, she kept both feet on the floor, shuffling along. This way, she would not drift off course and back into the water.

Abby crept along for what seemed like forever. She developed a system where she shuffled one foot way ahead, feeling to make sure there was ground. Then, she would slowly bring the other foot in line to the same position. Every few steps she called out to Emily, hoping she was in here. If she could not respond, at least she would hear Abby's voice and know that she was not alone.

Her front foot slipped off the edge directly in front of her. In her panic she flailed out with her arms, losing her balance. Her other foot slipped out from under her on the damp floor, and she landed on her tailbone with a thud. Feet dangling over the edge, she put her hands out to feel in front of her. Her right hand clanged off something that felt like a bar or a pipe. She grabbed on and pulled it. Whatever it was, it was solid as a rock. It did not budge.

She felt along the length of the object, as far as she could from her seated position. It seemed to have no end. Not one that she could feel anyway. She moved her arms below it and felt nothing but air. Moving her arms above it, her left hand smacked into another object that seemed to be the same size. The object seemed to be a long metal pipe, like a railing.

Abby backed up so her feet were entirely on the ledge. She kept her hand on the cool metal pipe, feeling along its length. To her right, she met up with the wall, to her left, the pipe bent and went back toward the direction where she had just come from, running parallel to the wall about five feet away from it. Keeping her right hand on

what she was thinking of as a railing, she stretched her arms as far as she could until her left hand felt the dampness of the wall.

She began walking back in the other direction like this, back in the direction from where she had come. She had more confidence this time. Having already been this way, and having the benefit of a guide on each side, the railing to her right and the wall to her left, she moved quickly.

It did not take her long to cover the distance. She would guess that she had shuffled along about fifty feet from one side to the other. She let out a little yelp at the end when she walked face first into another rock wall, bumping her forehead. She felt in front of her, and the wall was completely blocking her path. She had obviously reached the other end of the ledge. Feeling her way down to the ground, she sat.

Trapped in the darkness, she wished that she could see something. She held her hand inches from her face, but could not make out a thing. The blackness was wholly encompassing. She needed a light, a fire, anything to help her figure a way out.

She remembered her knife, still strapped to her leg. The handle was packed with cotton, and there was a flint. She had been starting their fires with this for the past few weeks. It took very little to get the kindling going. Once she had figured out that she could just use the flint to light up dry leaves instead of the cotton, she had stopped using the cotton all together. There was plenty left.

Kneeling down on the cool damp rock, she wondering if the surface would be suitable for her plan. It would have to be. The

waterproof cover on the back of the handle opened with a pop.

Feeling inside with her fingers, she pulled out a small wad of cotton. It would not burn for long, but she would get seven to ten seconds of bright flame before it turned into a glowing ember and floated away – hopefully long enough for her to see something useful. Her eyes were completely adjusted to the pitch black, so any tiny bit of light would be enough for her to see with. At least that is what she had convinced herself.

Abby fluffed and set up the cotton on the ground and positioned the flint over it. Carefully, she scraped the back edge of her knife down the length of the flint, sending a showing of sparks down onto the rock. The cotton did not catch. Nor did it catch on the second try. Adjusting the angle of the flint, she finally got it to catch on the third try.

Abby looked up as soon as the cotton lit so that the light would not blind her. She took in as much as she could in the few seconds that it burned. Mostly, she was looking at rock. She still could not see the water below, but she could hear it just fine. There was in fact a railing next to her that ran the length of the ledge. On the far side, where she had just walked from, there was what looked like a ladder going up. The light burned out before she could figure out where it went to, but she was satisfied. At least she had found something worth investigating.

Holding onto the railing to guide her, she swiftly walked to the far side of the ledge in the darkness. Once she was on the other side, she began feeling around for the ladder. She knew approximately

where it was, but finding it in the dark was a bit challenging. Abby wanted to make sure she was directly at the base of it when she lit the last wad of cotton. This would give her the best chance of seeing what was up there.

As she felt the smooth wall, her arm knocked into something with a hard edge that scraped her forearm. Feeling around the object, it seemed to be a large metal box attached to the wall. To the left of the metal box, she found the ladder. She squatted at the base of the ladder and prepared to light her last bit of cotton when she had an idea.

Standing up, she found the box on the wall again, and knocked on it. It was definitely metal. It was also about six feet above of the floor. Stretching her arms as high as she could, she was just able to reach over the top of it. If she could set the cotton on top of it, it would be that much closer to where she was trying to see. She only had one shot and decided to go for it.

Setting the cotton on top of the box, she stood on her toes. Reaching as high as she could, she began scraping the knife against the flint. Sparks flew everywhere. Everywhere, it seemed, except onto the cotton. She needed to get higher. Climbing to the second rung of the ladder she leaned to the side, against the box, where she could arrange the knife and flint over the top.

She leaned carefully against the box, as she had to remove both hands from the ladder to scrape the flint. She arranged herself well enough that she was able to run the knife down the flint, but then promptly lost her balance, slipping off the ladder and onto the hard,

rock floor. There was a faint glow above her, though. The cotton had caught fire. She jumped up and strained her eyes to see as high as she could. The ladder led to a landing, maybe ten feet above. It was impossible to see where it led to from there, if anywhere.

Her eyes rested on the metal box in front of her. She noticed a large lever on the right side of it. Just as the cotton burned out, she saw two words emblazoned across the front in red block letters: “Emergency Shutdown.”

Eric called ahead to Robert, “How much further?” He was having a hell of a time keeping up with the old guy.

Robert was silent and continued bounding up the hill.

Looking out to sea, Eric saw that they were very high above the cavern at this point. They had been running up the side of the hill for at least fifteen minutes, and he was exhausted. “Hey!” he yelled, stopping. “I asked you a question. Where are we going? Where is this other way in? They have been in the water for twenty minutes, at least. If we don’t get in there soon, who knows if we’ll be able to help them.”

Robert was several feet ahead when he stopped. Turning, he stood looking at Eric. He was sweating heavily, and looked to have somehow lost his deep tan. He opened and closed his mouth a couple of times, as though he wanted to say something, but just could not find the words. He was speechless.

“What is it?”

He whispered sadly. “There is no other way in Eric.”

“What are you talking about? You said there’s another way in. Where is it?”

Robert yelled, “There is no other way!”

“Then what the hell are we doing up here?”

“The cove is a death trap. No one who goes in comes out. That is a fact. Period. I am sorry, but Abby and Emily are gone. Nothing can be done about that. I could not let all three of you kill yourselves.”

Eric slowly walked toward Robert. “I’ve been chasing you up this hill while they’ve been drowning? Is that what you’re telling me?”

“I am sorry. I truly am. I really liked Abby. I wish she had listened to me.” Robert’s lip quivered a bit, “But what is done is done. We cannot change that. It is too late for them now.”

Eric shook his head in disbelief.

“Come back to my camp with me. This has to be a lot for you to process. Come back with me. Rest, eat. We will figure out how to move on together.” He placed his hand on Eric’s shoulder, “What do you say?”

Eric locked eyes with him. If he could kill someone with a stare, Robert would be lying lifeless on the ground. He turned to walk back in the direction they had come from.

Robert trotted up behind him, “Eric, you cannot help them, they are gone.”

Eric continued to storm down the hill.

“Eric, you cannot go in after them. They are dead by now, and you will be to if you are foolish enough not to listen to me.”

With his back turned to Robert, Eric spoke, "I can't just leave her."

Robert spoke harshly, "You do not have a choice. She is gone."

The anger rose in Eric's voice as he turned to face Robert, "Now! Now she's gone. When we were standing there at the water I could have jumped in, I could have helped her."

"No, you could not have helped her. You would just be with her." Robert went to put his hand on Eric's shoulder.

Eric slapped it away and pointed at him, "You have all the answers, don't you. Well let me tell you, I would rather be with her, dead, than be stuck here without her." He shoved Robert. "You had me chasing you up this goddamn hill when I could have been trying to help her." He shoved him again, harder. When Robert didn't fight back, Eric shoved him again, causing Robert to trip backwards and catch himself.

Robert stared at him and backed away. "I understand you are angry Eric, but you cannot blame me for trying to save your life."

Eric shot back, "I can when I could have been saving hers!" Twisting his body, Eric cocked his fist and shot a right hook to Robert's jaw that dropped him to the ground like a ragdoll. With that, he took off running straight downhill toward the top of the cavern and the water. He was not returning via the roundabout path they had taken, but was sprinting straight down an extremely steep incline. Tripping over a large rock, he fell and rolled twenty feet, bruising his arm and hip.

Popping back up, he continued his sprint without brushing

himself off. Skidding to a stop at the bottom, he stopped just a few feet from the ledge that doubled as the top of the cavern. He looked down at the rushing current below. From this vantage point, there was no doubting the water's swiftness. It was a long drop. Looking to the left, he saw that he could climb down the rocky side of the cavern entrance and to the beach. That would take too long he decided. It was a long drop to the water, but he had wasted too much time already.

Taking a deep breath, he ran and jumped off the top of the cavern, flinging his body as far from the rocks as he could. His arms and legs flailed as the ground disappeared from under his feet. There was something far out in the water. He only saw it for a split second, but realized instantly what it was. Several hundred yards out to sea, it was Emily's body, the sun gleaming off her fiery red hair.

THERE WAS SO MUCH to process. “What am I waiting for?” Abby asked the question to the darkness that surrounded her. For the past month she had been living on this island with no sign of civilization. Warming herself by fires, eating and drinking what she could find, sleeping on piles of leaves and branches. This very morning, she had woken up on just this sort of bed and drank water from a stream. Now she was standing in some sort of giant pitch-black cavern, and while she not could see it any longer, directly in front of her was a large metal box with a giant lever to be used in emergencies.

Well, if there ever was an emergency this was it. She was effectively blind, and had three choices, none of which were great. Heading up the ladder to another landing could lead to a way out, or it could just lead to another dead end. Once she was up there, she would have no way to find her way around or see any dangers. However she would have further to fall if she were to have a misstep. Jumping back in the water was also out. She had grown tired of fighting for her life surrounded by water. That was not even a choice. The only option she had left was the mystery box in front of her.

She felt the very large lever. It had to be twice the length of her forearm, and at least as thick as her wrist. She wrapped her small hands around it and said a prayer to whoever may have been listening. With a grunt, she yanked the lever as hard as she could. It

did not budge. Her shoulders protested the force that she had exerted. It was as though she had tried to yank a rod out of the ground, but it was sunk into concrete. It did not give even the slightest, discernible bit.

Shaking out her hands and shoulders, she paced for a moment before trying again. Wrapping her hands around it, as close to the top as she could get, she put her legs in a wide stance. Pulling down with as much strength as she could manage, her feet came slightly off the ground. She felt the lever move down just an inch or two before she gave up and it sprung back into place. It moved though, and that was all the encouragement she needed.

Taking a metaphorical step back, Abby assessed the situation. She obviously was not big enough or strong enough to pull down the lever. Her full body weight had just been hanging from it, and it only gave a couple of inches. Perhaps she could somehow push it down. She climbed the ladder until her feet were near the top of the box. The metal ladder and box were both a little moist from the condensation, and there was no chance of her drying off either of them with her soaking wet clothes. She would just have to hold on for her life.

Reaching out with her foot, she found the top of the lever. Her legs were much stronger than her arms. She put her weight and the power of her right leg behind it, while keeping her other foot on the ladder and clinging to it with both arms. Pushing, she got it to move a few inches on her first try, but it just bounced back like before, as if it were on a spring. She tried again with her single foot, and again it moved, but not enough.

Gripping the ladder as tight as she could, she inched out onto the box with both feet. The box only came out about six inches from the wall, so there was no room for error. She turned to the side so that her right shoulder was against the wall. This way she was able to still face the ladder and hold on with both hands. Abby did not think that what she was about to do was a good idea, but it was the only option she had.

With her left foot now against the lever, she pressed down until it would not move anymore with just the force of her pushing. Picking up her right foot, she carefully placed it against the lever, so that her full body weight was resting on it. Her weight alone was enough to get it to sink a few more inches. She began to bounce, only slightly, and felt it creep lower with each thrust.

As she balanced for a moment, she reassessed. Was this the best possible plan? Considering the circumstances, yes. She could come up with no other alternatives. Holding on tight to the ladder, she thought about closing her eyes, and then realized it did not make a difference. Either way, she could not see a thing. She bounced a couple of times, building momentum. On the third bounce she pushed her entire weight and strength down against the lever. To her shock, it immediately dropped with a thundering snap.

With the lever suddenly gone, Abby's feet flew out from under her and she tumbled backwards, losing her grip on the ladder. Lights as bright as the sun flashed on overhead. The blinding light caused her eyelids to instinctively snap shut as she fell toward a gigantic swirling vortex of water. Her left leg smacked against the railing, upending

her, causing her to fall head first into the massive twenty-yard wide whirlpool below.

She went under immediately, but somehow struggled back to the surface. Being whipped around the edge of the whirlpool so fast, it was very difficult for her to get her bearings. It was as though she were tied to the back of a boat. She was convinced no human had traveled so fast through the water otherwise.

Above her, the giant lights revealed that she was in a massive cavern. The walls, carved out of the rock, reached at least ten stories high. She saw the ladder that she had been able to latch onto when she was sucked under water on her way into this place, but now she was moving too fast to grip it. The best she could do was slam her hand against it, trying to catch it as she flew by. This caused sharp pains to shoot through her wrist and up her arm. Catching it the first time, underwater and blind, was just dumb luck. She quickly abandoned the thought that she could do it again and frantically looked for another way out.

She was out of time. She was being pulled toward the center of the vortex. She tried to swim back toward the edges, but the water was too strong, and her body was too weak. Even if she managed to reach the side, the ledge above was far out of her reach, and there was no way to climb the sheer wall of rock. Exhausted, she had reached her limit. She stopped paddling and floated in the water. She was no more than a cork bobbing in the ocean.

At that moment, Abby gave up.

Despite the violence of the water surging around her, the

feeling of complete freedom and liberation washed over her. She did not know why she was here on this island. There was nothing that she could do about her present circumstance. There was nothing left to do but accept it. Abby found herself at peace with that thought more easily than she would have imagined. Somehow, she felt as though she had accomplished what she had set out to do. Whatever that was.

Lying on her stomach in the water, she thought back to when she was a little girl. Dead man's float was what they used to call it when she was a kid playing in her grandmother's pool. Thinking about her childhood, she remembered one time that the whole family was in that old circular pool. There had to be at least twenty-five of them. That was a fun day, laughing and playing with her family. Abby held onto that memory. She will meet the end like this, completely at peace and without struggle.

Abby smiled and relaxed for the first time in a long time. It was over.

Yet, the end simply would not be that easy. Something heavy came up through the water under her and crashed into her chest, causing her to gasp and suck in a mouthful of water. Lifting her head out of the water, her arms kicked into gear to bring her floating upright. Hacking up the salty seawater, she glanced around trying to figure out what had just happened.

Looking around, she saw nothing. *Was it a fish? A shark?* Whatever it was, it was bigger than her. Her eyes scanned the water until they came to rest on the figure of a man floating on his stomach a few yards away. The sandy hair gave him away. It was Eric.

He was in front of her, so she easily swam to catch up with him and latched onto him, pulling him tight. Pulling his face out of the water, she realized that he was unconscious. He probably was not breathing either, but that was impossible to tell in their current predicament. She slapped him in the face, trying to wake him up. There was no response.

She held onto him trying to determine her next move. He had come after her. He just was not as lucky as she had been, and now he was dead. Her screams echoed off the gigantic walls. It took her a moment to realize that she had actually *heard* her own scream. The deafening sound of the water had died down. They were still swirling around the giant pool, but there was no longer the funnel in the center pulling the water and everything else down into it. The water was slowing down.

The emergency switch must have shut down the whirlpool. Why there was a whirlpool in the first place was a question for another time. Right now, her only thought was how to get them out of the water and get Eric breathing again. Hooking her arms under his, she swam with him toward the ladder that led up to the ledge. She realized about halfway there that trying to swim in a straight line towards it was completely exhausting. Instead she aimed for the wall to the right of it. As she got closer, she allowed the slowing current to carry her close enough to the ladder so that she could grab onto the bottom rung and hold on.

Looking up, Abby saw it was about a ten-foot climb to the top. Up there, she could lay him down on the ledge and get him breathing

again. In the water, she could maneuver him around just fine, but outside the water was another story altogether. Eric was about a foot taller, and probably eighty pounds heavier than she was. She pushed his back against the ladder so that they were facing each other. Getting as close to him as she could, she put her ear to his lips to listen for any indication that he was breathing. She heard nothing.

She had to act quickly. In that same position, she tried to give him mouth-to-mouth. She found that she could not force much, if any, air into his waterlogged lungs. She had to get him to the top. Putting her arms under his shoulders, she tried to climb to the top while supporting his weight. She made it up two rungs before his body was mostly out of the water and he became too heavy to support. He slid down. Abby kicked her knee forward to stop him before he went back into the water. Her knee caught him in the stomach.

Shimmying down the ladder, she tried mouth-to-mouth again. Still she got no response. She could not remember where she had learned CPR, but she knew she had to compress his chest. Struck by an idea, she put her arms under his again, and climbed the rungs of the ladder until they were out of the water. Her biceps burned under the weight of supporting the two of them. She kissed him, blew into his mouth again several times, and said, "I'm sorry."

With that, she purposely let him fall toward the water while she brought her knee up, slamming it into his diaphragm. She braced herself, holding him in place with the first knee, and did it again with her other knee. Repeating this again and again, she screamed in frustration, desperate for it to work. Just as she was about to give up,

he coughed and choked. Water came spewing from his mouth.

Gagging and gasping for air, he opened his eyes and saw Abby.

“Oh, thank God,” she said. She held onto him and the ladder, keeping them both out of the water. Her muscles shook with fatigue as she buried her face into his neck. “Let’s never let go.”

Getting his bearings, he reached back and held onto the ladder with one arm, the other still wrapped around Abby’s waist. Looking around, he said, “Where the hell are we?”

She laughed. “Let’s climb this ladder first. I’ll tell you all about it.”

OLIVIA PACED back and forth in front of the giant screen on the wall of her office. “Well, what in the world do we do now?”

“You’re the producer,” Robert shot from the other side of the world, via teleconference. “This scenario had never crossed your mind before?”

“What has never crossed my mind? That you would fail so miserably that every contestant on the show winds up dead? I’ve been telling you, Robert, I’ve been telling you for years, we need more boots on the ground out there. We need more control over the show.”

“That defeats the whole point, Olivia. This show is a social experiment. You plant a half dozen fake contestants out here, and we completely lose all integrity.”

“Damn you and your integrity, Robert! How is that worse than having to flush half a season because the entire cast is dead?” She was not concerned on a personal level that they had died, but the fact that she suddenly found herself with no show felt like a kick in the stomach.

“We recovered when Tom showed up and killed the rest of them. We will recover again.”

“I told you *then* that we needed more control damn it. We recovered then because we still had a show. Sure it was just Tom and Emily, but we still had a show. We had a jumping off point to build

from. We had people on the damned island. This is a total disaster. We have nothing. The next group is only two weeks into their training. We could not possibly be ready to start filming for six weeks at best. In the absolute best-case scenario, we are looking at being off the air for two months.”

“I never intended for this to happen.”

“Of course you didn’t, but it did. I hate to say I told you so, but I knew this was coming eventually. We are at the ten-year mark. This is a critical point, and you know that. As smart as you are, and as much as you care about this, you should have listened to me. I just wanted to protect your assets.”

“You’re right, all right, Olivia? You’re right. Is that what you want to hear? You’re right, and I was wrong, and now some really exceptional people are dead because of that. Now, could we move on and figure out a solution?”

She was still pacing through her large office. “Maybe they survived? How long until we can get in there?”

Robert shook his head. “Impossible. This is the biggest, private, water-pumping system in the world. Six hundred thousand liters of water are sucked down that funnel every minute. The water shoots through the tunnel, four hundred yards out to sea, where it pushes the current around that side of the island. There are smaller jets all around the island to keep the current going and keep the contestants on, or at least around, the island. But this is the main one, and it is a violent, turbulent trip through the system. A trained diver in full scuba gear could not survive a trip through this thing.”

“But you dock the boats in there when you need to get people on and off the island. It can’t be a total death trap.”

“We do it in the middle of the night when we can shut the current down. It is perfectly safe when it is not running. Even though there is about a twenty-minute delay after it starts back up again, and it takes close to an hour to be operating at full power, we make sure everyone and everything is clear of the island before we turn it on again. It is a hell of a thing when it gets going.”

“So there’s no chance?”

“Olivia, I’m looking out to sea at Emily’s body floating four hundred yards off shore. She went in first. There is a crew coming over from across the way to pick her up. Abby will be next, and I figure Eric should be surfacing by the time they make it over here.”

“Why didn’t you just shut it down before they went in?”

“That goes against everything the show is about. If I truly intervened, they would know the secret. At the very least, they would know that events and circumstances were being controlled. After that, how long before they put two and two together and figure out what is happening? The show would be over either way.”

“We don’t have any cameras in there? Just on the off-chance they made it?”

“It’s pitch black in there Olivia. Even if we did have cameras, they would not pick up anything. After the crew comes to pick up the bodies, I’m going to have them pick me up to bring me back across the way to my house. No sense in staying if I am the only one on the island. I will be going in the access tunnel to shut it down so they can

come in. But trust me, I will not be finding anyone waiting in there to be saved.”

“What’s done is done,” she said. “We have no choice. We go to air in two days. I just cannot believe that we’re going to air an episode where everyone on the island winds up dead. Well, except you of course, but that won’t be a surprise to anyone.”

“They were all such wonderful people. Especially Abby. Her story was remarkably touching. That is the saddest part of this whole thing. She was a true redemption story. Seems like such a waste. I know you will put together a spectacular tribute.”

“It will have to be spectacular, Robert. This might be our last show ever.”

“What is this place?” Eric wondered out loud, climbing down from the ladder that lead up to the second ledge. They had gone up there to try to find a way out, but did not have any luck. The ledge was identical to the one below, the only difference being that there was a giant steel door at the far side. They spent ten minutes pushing, pulling, and doing anything they could think of to open the door. Yet, it did not budge an inch. After determining that it must be locked from the other side, they decided that they were going to have to leave the cavern the same way that they had come in: underwater.

Standing on the lower ledge along the water, he looked around the huge space that they were in. He took in the high walls and the enormous pool of water below. It appeared as though it was carved right out of the rock.

“You’ve got me,” Abby said.

She showed him the switch that she had thrown and explained that it appeared to have shutdown the whirlpool, though she had no idea what purpose the whirlpool itself might serve. “Where do you think the water goes?”

“I might have an idea.” Eric explained how he saw Emily’s body floating out at sea. “There was no mistaking it was her, the way the sun was gleaming off that red hair of hers.”

“This whole thing doesn’t make any sense. What purpose would it serve?”

“I have no idea. You’re lucky you didn’t wind up in here when you floated in on the raft.”

“True. Robert plucked me out of the water. Do you think he knows what’s in here?”

“He did everything he could to keep me out. I’m willing to bet he has some idea.”

Abby had a thought. “Do you remember I told you that when I was going out on the raft, I was fighting a current and couldn’t get back in? I hadn’t thought about it before, but the current was going sideways. It carried me in a circle around the island, and was bringing me right back to this spot.”

“You think this whirlpool has something to do with that?”

“I think it does. What if this is part of some giant manmade current that goes around the island?”

“Why would an island need a manmade current?”

“I don’t know. If we knew why we were here in the first place

we might be able to figure that out. Maybe its purpose is to keep people from leaving.”

“Who would try to keep us here?”

“Probably whoever put us here in the first place.” She laughed at a private thought. “Does this seem like something your buddies would do?”

Eric laughed, too. “Nope. We’ve been way beyond that theory for a long time.”

“I’m willing to bet Robert knows more than he let on.”

“I left him laid out on the ground up top. Should we go find him?”

Abby thought about that. If the current was made to keep them on the island, and it is shut down at the moment, what was to keep them here? Now might be their only chance to escape. Not only that, but as nice as Robert was, she was beginning to suspect he might have something to do with why they were trapped on the island in the first place. At the very least, he made it clear that he did not want them to go. “No,” she said. “With this thing shut down, we can leave the island. I say we make a break for it now.”

“How? We don’t have any way to leave.”

“The raft. It was on the beach outside of the entrance. We grab a couple branches for paddles and get as far away from here as we can. They won’t be as good as the oars we made, but they will have to do.”

“Now that we know how to shut it down, why not get all our ducks in a row, come back and shut it down later? Then make for the

other island.”

“No. It was total dumb luck that I was able to do it the first time. There is no way we can count on repeating that. Besides, whoever put this thing here, and put us here, if they haven’t noticed already that it is shut down, they are going to soon. Once they know that... things could get complicated.”

“The other island has to be ten miles out. How long will that take? Will we even make it that far without water?”

“I spent a day and a half circling this island. Admittedly, I was worse for wear afterwards, but I survived. I know we can do it Eric. If we don’t go for it now, we may never get another chance.”

Eric thought about it and ultimately agreed.

“This is a huge current,” Abby said, “if it really goes around the entire island. It must take awhile to really get going. I say we start it up again, and pretend we were never in here. Hopefully we have time to swim out, grab the raft, and reach the open ocean before it really gets going.”

Eric had an idea. “You said that it was really hard for you to throw the switch, right?”

“Yes, but there are two of us now, and you’re a big guy. I don’t think we will have a problem with that.”

“No, I don’t think so. Actually, I think I should be able to do it on my own. You swim out first. Get the raft ready, and some branches to paddle with. I’ll hang back here for ten minutes or so, throw the switch, then come to meet you.

“What if you get stuck in here?”

“I won’t. I’ll be in the water two seconds after I throw the switch. I figure if we can have everything ready to go before we start it up again, we will have a better chance of getting out of here. Think about it. We get this thing going, and *then* we waste twenty minutes swimming out of here, getting the raft and paddles together. What sense does that make?”

Abby looked toward the giant wall of rock on the opposite side of the room. Presumably that wall extended only partway down into the water, and the water came into this interior cavern under that wall. She asked, “How long do you think it will take to swim out?”

“I don’t know. Coming in didn’t take that long. I couldn’t have been in for more than a few minutes before I went under and blacked out.”

“But coming in, the current was basically sucking us in. It will probably take about ten minutes to go out. How will you know how long it’s been?”

“I’ll do a slow count to six hundred. That should be about right.”

Abby smiled at him and tussled his hair, “You’re a smart one, aren’t ya?” She kissed him. “I’ll be ready when you come out. No hero stuff, understand? Don’t think that if something goes wrong that you are going to sacrifice yourself to save my ass.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

She stared him straight in the eye as they held each other. “I’m not kidding, Eric. I’m not leaving this island without you. If you don’t come out of here, I’m coming back in for you. Got it?”

He kissed her soft on the lips. “Got it,” he said smiling. “Now go.”

Abby jumped into the water and swam across the now still-circular pool, up to the giant wall. Taking a deep breath, she plunged headfirst and straight down the wall. A few feet down she found that the wall did end and there was an opening that led out to the cove. It ran the length of the room, and there was a faint bit of light coming out from underneath it.

As she swam under the wall, she saw that it was very thick. It was probably eight feet of solid rock from one side to the other. When she finally got to the other side, her lungs began to burn a bit. Fortunately, it was a quick ascent to the surface, where she quickly sucked in several large lungfuls of air before heading out toward the opening and daylight.

Once at the beach, she immediately went to the raft and gave it a shake. The vines holding it together were looser than they had been when they had launched it the first time, but it would have to do. The tree line came almost right up to the water, and she quickly found several large branches that appeared mostly hollow. Abby figured that she had plenty of time. She had made it out of the water faster than they had figured, plus Eric still had to swim out.

Using her knife, she separated the wood near the end of the branches and sliced off half the wood at the bottom foot of each branch. This made a sort of scoop that could act as a paddle. It was not pretty, but it would do the job.

Back on the other side of the wall, Eric counted to six hundred. Bracing himself under the lever, he pushed, and it flew up with a snap. The lights immediately blacked out and within a few seconds he began to hear a low hum coming from deep underneath him. “Shit,” he said. He did not know he would have to find his way out in the dark.

He knew that his destination was directly across the room from where he stood. With no light at all, how was he going to swim a straight line from one side to the other? He figured he would have to do his best. The hum from underneath was getting more intense, and he did not intend to stick around to see what that meant.

Carefully climbing over the railing, he stood for a moment with the heels of his feet on the ledge and his hands behind his back, holding onto the railing. He wanted to center his thoughts and concentrate. He did not even have to close his eyes. He could not see a thing anyway. As it often did, his mind drifted to Abby. He might just be in love with her. With that thought, he dove into the water and swam for several minutes until his right hand smacked against what felt like the wall he was looking for.

He had watched Abby for as long as he could see her when she swam out. From what he figured, she just swam straight down the wall and up the other side. Briefly he wondered how he knew she made it to the other side. What if something had happened underwater and she was stuck under there in the darkness? He smiled. He just knew that was not the case. Failing is one thing that girl did not know how to do.

Taking in a deep breath, he dove under the water and kicked straight down. For a moment he questioned how he would find the bottom of the wall in the darkness, but then he saw the faint light at the bottom, and headed straight for that.

Under the water, the hum was very loud, only now it sounded like engines of some sort. Maybe engines that suck the water down and spit it back out in the ocean? He kicked harder, determined that he would not be in there long enough to find out.

AS ERIC EMERGED FROM THE water, he announced that it was time to go. “The current is definitely kicking on. It’s not flowing fast yet, but I could definitely feel it.”

They dragged the raft into the water, worried that it may not float. To their delight, it did. Some of the logs were a little loose, but Eric quickly tightened the vines that were securing them and they hopped on to test it with their weight. Satisfied that they would not sink immediately, they grabbed the oars and pushed out into the channel to paddle toward open water.

As they approached the mouth of the cove Eric turned to look back at the beach. “Wait! The satchel!”

Abby looked up, “What’s that?”

Eric was looking back toward the beach. “The satchel that I packed at the camp this morning with fruit and water, it’s right there on the beach. Son of a bitch.” He stared at it and Abby could tell what he was thinking.

She stopped paddling and grabbed the back of his shirt. “Don’t even think about swimming back for it. You are not leaving me alone on this raft a second time.”

He smiled, flashing his dimples, “I meant well anyway.” He kissed her. Not a quick peck on the lips, but a long slow kiss that told her he meant business.

Abby allowed herself to fantasize for a moment about taking him right then and there on the raft, current be damned. Since she saw him back at Emily's camp and realized he was still alive, the thought of tearing off his clothes and consummating their relationship had never been far from her mind. As they kissed and his hand traveled up her inner thigh it sent sparks of electricity through her body. *It probably hasn't been far from his mind either*, she thought. She was a little lightheaded, maybe from the sun, maybe from the kiss, maybe a little bit of both. Summoning every ounce of will power she had, she broke off the kiss. "Let's paddle out of here first."

He kissed her one more time and smiled, "You're absolutely right."

They paddled hard trying to make it out of the cove. The current wasn't strong, but moving the raft through it proved difficult. As they crossed the threshold out of the mouth of the cove, they almost immediately noticed the work became easier once they crossed the boundary where the water flowed in. It was not a strong current yet, but it had definitely started back up again. They did not let up in their efforts. Despite her tired arms, Abby kept in time with the Eric's strong strokes using his makeshift oar. He was stronger though, so they were drifting left.

It was not long before they saw her. Emily's body, far to the left and floating ahead in the distance.

Abby wondered out loud, "What if she's alive?"

"I can't imagine she would be. She's been out here... must be damn near an hour. It doesn't look like she's swimming."

“We can’t just leave her out here.”

“What are we supposed to do? I don’t think we have any time to waste here.”

Abby stopped paddling and called out, “Em! Emily!”

No response, though they were still hundreds of yards from her.

“She’s gone, Abby. Come on, we need to paddle.”

They sliced through the water with their oars as fast as they could. The only sounds they heard were their own labored breathing and the splash of the water when the paddles hit the surface. It was warm, and the water that sprayed up felt good. It was funny to Abby that there were so many good things about water. She needed it to live, yet had spent an inordinate amount of time over the past few weeks, and the past few days, fighting against it for her life.

The thought that the water had taken Emily’s life struck her. *That could have been me*, she thought. *That should have been me*. She owed her life to Emily. She could not just let her body drift off through the ocean to eventually be picked at by sea birds and fish. Her body was moving in a counterclockwise direction in relation to the island now, and so were they. The current was back on and they were clearly caught in the band of it that surrounded the island. They were still making progress; at least it appeared that way. She did not know how wide a band the current was out here. They were paddling through it. Maybe Emily would drift out of it?

“We have to take her with us. I just can’t stand the thought of leaving her out here. She’s right there.” The body was now fairly close.

Eric did not break from paddling, though Abby had. He paddled from one side, then the other, to make up for her lack of contribution. “We can’t, Abby. If you haven’t noticed, we’re moving left, but we’re not paddling in that direction. If this thing gets up to full speed, and it’s as strong as you said, we’re going to be stuck here.”

“But we’re so close. She can’t be more than fifty yards out.”

He stopped paddling, and they started drifting. He turned to her, “Damn it, Abby, I want to get her too, but we can’t. How long before this thing gets up to full speed?”

They sat on the raft, looking at each other. Neither wanted to budge. Abby looked over Eric’s shoulder and saw that Emily’s body had floated further away from them than it had been just a few moments ago. She looked back at the island and made a mental note of the cluster of rocks on the shore that were directly in front of their location. She looked back to Emily a couple of minutes later and saw she was even further away now. After watching her continue to drift further away for a full minute, she looked back to the island and saw the rocks were basically in the exact same position.

“We’re not moving, Eric!”

“I know, so let’s get working on that.” He nodded toward the oar sitting lifeless in her hand.

“No, I mean we’re not moving along with Emily. We’re not in the current. We must be on the other side of it. Look!” She pointed out her landmark on the shore, and Emily floating further away to their left.

He breathed a sigh of relief and looked out toward the island

that they were trying to get to. There was still a lot of work ahead, but the toughest part was hopefully over. “Thank God. I was starting to worry we weren’t going to make it out. How long do you think it takes that thing to get up to speed?”

She was looking out at Emily. She figured her body must be a hundred yards out by now. Looking at Eric she said, “Let’s hope that takes a little longer.” Diving into the water, she made straight for Emily’s location.

“Abby! What the hell are you doing?”

She never answered him, just swam as hard as she could toward Emily. Maybe she was alive, more than likely she was dead, but either way, Abby could not just leave her there. Had Emily not gone in first, it most certainly would have been Abby. Had it not been for luck, all three of them would have been floating lifelessly out here.

Once she was a few dozen yards away, Eric saw that Abby began moving more swiftly than she should. She must be in the current now. Emily was dead weight, but Abby was pounding the water hard and closing the distance fast. He thought about turning the raft around and going in after her, but decided against it. It had been hard enough paddling out the first time.

Eric began moving the raft parallel to where Abby was swimming and Emily was floating. He was trying to close the distance between them without winding up back in the current. There was no line in the water to tell him where the current began. However, about twenty yards out, he could see a large cluster of seaweed and driftwood floating on the surface of the water heading in the same

direction he was. It passed him.

He figured that he was about as close as he dared get. Eric began planning out loud. “She’s strong, and she will be able to swim back out. If she can’t, I’ll paddle in and pick them up. We’ll never get back out, but we will figure something out and make our way back to the island, if nothing else.”

Abby had caught up to Emily and was trying to drag her out to sea, away from the island and closer to Eric and the raft. She was having a difficult time, though, more from dragging a body than fighting the current. She actually found it much easier to cut through the water swimming than it had been when she was trying to maneuver the raft. Whatever purpose the current served, it seemed that a smaller body, like a person, was able to maneuver through it much easier than a large object like a raft or a boat. Seeing the island hundreds of yards in the distance, Abby doubted that anyone in their right mind would ever attempt to swim out this far on their own.

Eric watched from the raft, maybe thirty yards away. He could tell she was struggling, and feared she might drown. He would have to paddle in to pick up two bodies. When she took a break for a moment and just floated there, he yelled out to her, “Just wait there! I’m coming to pick you up!”

She waived her free arm frantically and yelled back, “No! No! I can do this!” She began kicking and swimming with one hand, dragging Emily’s body behind her. Eric was overwhelmed with concern as he watched her bob up and down in the water. Each time she went out of sight behind a swell, he held his breath until it went

down and he saw her again. She was clearly exhausted, barely making a splash as she struggled toward the raft.

She was close now, just a few yards away, and he stretched out his hand reaching as far toward her as he could. He called out to her, “Come on Abby, just a few more feet.” Abby floated in the water, exhausted, reaching out with her hand. Their fingertips touched, and he grabbed her hand tight. He pulled Abby up first, and then they heaved Emily up onto the raft together.

Abby immediately began trying to resuscitate her, but it was pointless, though that did not stop her from continuing to try. She compressed Emily’s chest and gave her mouth-to-mouth for nearly ten minutes with increasing urgency before Eric pulled her off when she became frantic.

“She’s gone,” he said.

He stroked her soft hair as Abby cried into his shoulder, repeating, “It could have been me... it could have been me.”

Olivia disconnected the call and quickly dialed Robert, who picked up immediately, “You’re not going to believe this,” she said very excitedly.

“What is that?”

“I just got a call on the satellite from the crew that was going out to retrieve the body.” She paused for dramatic effect. “They are alive!”

“What? Who is alive?”

“Abby and Eric. The guy I spoke with was looking at them

through his binoculars. They're alive on their raft and paddling toward the other island. And get this, they have Emily, too."

"She made it?" Robert was thrilled. He felt a lump in his throat, overcome with joy.

"No, Robert. I'm sorry. It looks like she died."

He was quiet for a while. At least Abby and Eric made it, but how? "How did they get from the cavern out into open water?"

"I don't know, but they did."

Robert observed, "Well, I guess we will still have one hell of a show to do."

"Why's that?"

He laughed, "It's a first, Olivia." His excitement quickly escalated, "They escaped. I know we are still done for the season, but at least they are not dead. They still won. They escaped the island! Oh, this is going to be great."

"It would be better if we were filming."

"Damn, that's right. We do not have any of our remote cameras out there. What about the team on the boat?"

"I already asked. They don't have a camera that can zoom in close enough, and I told them to stay back out of sight until I talk to you. Don't you have a helicopter at your place on the other island? How quickly can it get in the air?"

"Just about as quick as my pilot can spin her up. Tell the crew in the boat to stay back for a bit. Let me get on the line across the way and get the bird in the air. It is only a ten-minute flight from one island to the next, but I am going to have him circle wide around to

come over and pick me up so they do not notice it. I have got my camera here.” He checked his watch, “By the time it picks me up, and we get back out there, we can be in the air filming inside of forty minutes. They will be alright for at least that long, right?”

“Robert, I don’t think anything can kill these two. I’m sure they will survive another forty minutes on a raft.” Olivia laughed. “You sound like a little schoolboy.”

“They are alive! Thank heavens!”

Forty-five minutes later, Abby and Eric were still paddling. It was hard work, but they were making progress. They just were not making the progress they hoped for, mainly due to their makeshift oars. Their hands were becoming raw and numb, and the lower the sun got in the sky the lower their energy levels became. It was closing in on dusk, and the few lights on the island they were heading toward began to flicker on.

The stinging in her hands caused Abby to stop, and Eric soon joined her. They tried to ignore the waterlogged body lying on the raft, but that was a tall order under the circumstances. They both knew that they could cover far more ground without the extra weight, but neither wanted to suggest they leave Emily behind, especially after the effort they had gone through to retrieve her.

“How far, you think?” Abby asked.

“At this rate, I honestly don’t know. I’m running on empty. Once it gets dark, if we lose sight of those few lights up there, or there’s a strong current... I just don’t know.”

They sat silent, rising and falling with the swells in the water.

“I think it’s time,” she said.

Eric nodded his head in agreement. Abby was upset because she felt that Emily’s fate could have, or should have, been her own. She had not spent the past week with Emily though, as Eric had. A week on this island was like a dog year, and Emily had quite literally saved his life. The guilt of just leaving her out here was heavy on his heart. However, he knew that had she been able to speak for herself she would have told them never to fish her out of the water in the first place. It was what had to be done.

Abby asked, “Should we say a prayer?”

Neither was particularly religious, but they bowed their heads and held hands. Abby quietly prayed that Emily, after a long year of hard living, had finally found peace. They held her shoulders and, nodding at each other, began to slide her feet first into the water. Warm tears rolled down Abby’s cheeks, and Eric bit his lower lip trying to stifle his own tears.

Before the body was halfway in, a massive blast from an air horn behind the raft caused them both to jump and snap their heads around to see where the sound had come from. They heard the motor next and hauled Emily back onto the raft. The sudden shift in weight caused the raft to tilt and nearly flip, but they leaned back to right it, before finally pulling her aboard. On their knees they began frantically waving at the approaching boat, even though it was obvious that it was heading straight for their location.

Smiles broke out across their faces, and they embraced in a

kiss. They crouched down as the boat pulled up, careful not to let the wake send them toppling off their little raft. There were smiles all around, and the men on the boat helped them board. They pulled Emily up, as well, and laid her across the bench at the rear of the boat, laying a blanket over her.

Very concerned, one of the men asked, “How are you guys doing?”

Eric clapped him on the shoulder and gave him a bear hug. “Great, now! We’re lucky you guys were out here.”

“What are you folks doing floating out here on those logs?”

“You wouldn’t believe me if I told you, brother. But if you get us back to that island you came from over there, I’ll tell ya’ll about it.”

“Sounds like a deal.”

They wrapped Abby and Eric in thick blankets. It was warm, but the sun was down and they had been wet for hours. They were shivering.

Abby was looking around the boat. It was a speedboat, and they were cruising back to the island at a fast clip. She noticed there was no fishing equipment around. No coolers. Nothing that one would normally associate with a day out on a boat. The men aboard were not even dressed like they were out for a boat trip.

She asked one of the men, “What brings you guys out tonight?”

He did not answer. Just then a helicopter flew close in overhead, buzzing the speeding boat. It slowed and made a wide circle around the boat. Abby and Eric watched it and saw a man hanging out of the bay door, holding what looked like a camera. As the helicopter

came in closer they saw the man was waving. Abby and Eric looked at each other in confusion. It was Robert. The pilot of the boat honked the air horn and waved back as the helicopter got out in front to lead the boat back to the island.

Eric hit the pilot of the boat on the arm to get his attention.

“What the hell is going on here?”

The man smiled, “You wouldn’t believe me if I told you, brother. But when we get back to that island over there, we’ll tell you all about it.”

AS THE BOAT approached the dock, Abby and Eric could see a small group of people waiting for them in the distance, all talking with what appeared to be great excitement. There was a man amongst them with a small camera following the boat as it came in, and another with a boom microphone. The man standing in the middle was obviously in charge. Robert. He was speaking very animatedly to the four or five others who were there, and wildly waving his arms as he recounted some story.

The boat had not even stopped at the dock yet when Eric leapt off, walking straight toward the group with purpose in his step. They were all smiling, until Eric pounced on Robert, wrestling him to the ground. They scuffled for a moment until the other men easily pulled him off. He was furious, but his body was worn and weak. He did not have much fight left in him. Abby came running up from behind and grabbed onto Eric around his waist. It appeared that she was holding him back, but they both knew she was holding him up.

He said through heavy breaths, "What the hell is going on here, Robert? You have a helicopter? You better have a damn good explanation."

Robert held up his hands. Walking up to them, he put a hand on each of their shoulders. "This is going to be a lot to swallow," he said. "We usually do this under much more ideal circumstances. Much

more controlled circumstances. But you two have not given us much of a choice this time around, have you?”

Abby and Eric looked at each other, neither had any idea what he was talking about.

“The two of you are on a very successful television show called *Trial Island*.”

Abby was stunned. “What?”

“It’s true,” Robert said. “This island, it is a television show. One of the biggest shows around in fact.”

“I ain’t never heard of it,” Eric said. “How big could it be?”

“There is a good reason for that,” Robert said. He explained the memory wipe, but they did not quite believe him. “Think about it. You do not remember how you got here. But more important, when you arrived, you found that your bodies were different than they should be, correct? You felt stronger, and fit? That is because for the two months prior to landing on the island you were in a hardcore boot camp getting in shape and getting drilled basic on survival skills until you could do them in your sleep.”

Abby remembered her first day on the island, when she looked down at her stomach and thought it appeared smaller than it should. It also had not gone unnoticed to her that she was a very strong swimmer, despite never having spent much time in the water until the past few weeks.

“I know you have not seen a mirror in a month, but when you do, you are going to look very different than you think you should.”

They stood in silence for a moment, processing this

information. Eric finally spoke, looking over at Abby. “I agree with Em.”

“About what?”

“You look great. But there’s no way I’d believe you’re twenty-two.”

Abby laughed and Robert smiled, as they seemed to be relaxing and warming up to the idea.

Abby said, “I wouldn’t believe most of what happened in the last few weeks, so I guess this isn’t that strange, comparatively.”

“Listen,” Robert said, “we have hot food, hot showers, and warm beds waiting for you back at the house. You have had a long month, and one hell of a long day. We will go back to the house, clean up, and have a proper meal. We will talk about this some more once you have rested.”

Abby examined Robert’s face. Sincere. That is how she would describe him. She nodded her head yes.

Eric smiled at Robert. “You haven’t steered us wrong yet. I’ll bite.”

They climbed up into an open-air truck for the short ride. Robert excitedly talked about the show. He filled them in on the big picture overview. What the show was, how popular it is, and how many millions have been watching them for the last few weeks.

“It is going to be an unbelievable finale. When you guys went into the cavern I thought for sure you were dead. You have to understand that there have been a handful of others who have gone in there over the last ten years. Not one of them lived to tell about it.

The audience is going to assume you are dead, too. We will do a whole segment on how dangerous it is. That it is certain death, et cetera. We will really play it up. When they find out you not only lived, but also escaped the island, America will go nuts! You will be the biggest celebrities in the country!”

It was all a lot to process. Abby thought it would probably be easier if she could remember the show. Certainly she must have watched it in the past. “Will we get our memories back?”

“Absolutely.” He explained the chip implant and how it worked. “It is a super-simple procedure. The toughest part is psychological, you know, getting all of those memories back at once. We have a little less than thirty-six hours until we air the live show, so we have time.”

“Wait,” she said. “Are we not going to remember each other?” She looked at Eric, panicked.

“No, do not worry. You will remember each other just fine. You will not forget anything that has happened since the memory wipe; you will just remember everything before it in addition.”

“Good,” Eric said, pulling Abby close and kissing her on the forehead. “What about Emily?”

“That is a heartbreaker,” Robert said. “She was just a few weeks away from the one-year mark. That is the other way you can win. Either escape the island, or survive for a year. We are contacting the family as you and I are speaking. She will be flown back to the States for a proper burial.”

Abby asked, “So Tom was close to a year too, then? How would

that have worked, had he won?"

"What do you mean?"

Eric knew what she meant. "He killed all those people. Doesn't he win but just wind up in jail?" Eric was suddenly struck with a thought, "Wait a second..."

Robert read his mind, "Your hands are not exactly clean either, are they Eric? Do not worry. The island is privately owned. We are part of a chain of thousands of islands in the Philippines. The laws in these parts of the world are fairly flexible, and although you do not remember it, all of the contestants sign off on a stack of waivers about an inch thick. There are no legal repercussions for anything that happens on the island."

Abby asked, "How is that possible? People are dead. Someone has to answer for that!"

"That is a risk of the show. It is a risk that all contestants are made fully aware of. For the chance to participate, though, all of the contestants sign off on hold harmless agreements that release everyone – the producers, financiers, other contestants, *et cetera* – from any legal liability in the event of death, dismemberment, or any other type of injury. The paperwork and legalese are exhausting, but the gist of it is that it's anything goes out there, and legally everyone agrees to just that."

Eric breathed a sigh of relief.

"You were just defending us anyway," Abby said, patting his leg.

As they crested a hill, a grand mansion came into view. It was a

massive Victorian-style structure painted a very muted sage green with brilliant white trim all around. A large tower rose up from the center of the mansion, topped with a conical roof. The many arches of the large portico that ran across the front of the home were each individually lit, making the home stand out against the dark sky behind it.

“Welcome home,” Robert said as he helped them out of the truck. Several assistants came out of the house to greet them. After several rounds of congratulatory handshakes, Robert appointed several of the assistants to show Abby and Eric to their rooms so they could clean up and rest while dinner was put together. Robert pointed out the long hallway they would follow to their rooms, and that the large dining room was directly on the other side of the foyer.

“When you are ready, just find your way back here.” He paused and motioned for them both to come in for a group hug. “I’m so proud of you two.”

Back in her room, Abby could not have imagined sleeping in two places that were more different than last night and tonight. It was less than twenty-four hours ago that she found Emily’s camp and had spent the night on a thin cloth that was covering a pile of leaves. As she looked around the exquisitely appointed room where she would be spending this evening, she felt it was a completely surreal experience.

She walked down the gleaming hardwood floors of a short hallway within the room and found a bathroom. She chuckled. Never in her life had she imagined she would be so happy to see a toilet. The

bathroom was covered in marble and shiny chrome, with a large glassed-in shower that was bigger than any closet Abby had used in her life. She had a month's worth of sand, dirt, salt, and grime to wash off, and wasted no time stripping down and immersing herself in the hot water cascading from the enormous showerhead.

Getting out of the hot shower she caught her muted reflection in the foggy mirror. Taking a thick facecloth, she wiped the mirror clean and stood back to look at herself. Robert was right. The woman who stared back was not entirely who she expected to see. She was Abby, but she did not quite recognize the person she saw in the mirror. She was lean, cut, and tough. If she saw herself walking down the sidewalk after dark, she would cross the street. She noticed what looked like very faint stretch marks on the underside of her abdomen. Looking straight down, they were not visible. She could only make them out in the mirror faintly. She chuckled and patted her stomach. She must have put on a few pounds over the years, before she got in shape again.

She wrapped herself in a thick plush robe and found her way back to the main room. As happy as she was to see the toilet and shower, the bed offered the most irresistible invitation. It was covered with a thick, white down comforter and a pile of pillows larger than any one person could use. Abby ran her hand over the comforter. It was, in fact, softer than anything she had felt in the past month, possibly the softest thing she had ever felt in her life.

Abby collapsed into the bed, allowing the soft down to envelop her and suck her in. She was not lying on the bed; she had become

part of the bed. For a few moments, she tried to keep her eyes open, but it was a futile effort. The running, the struggles, the fights, and the sleepless nights all caught up with her at that moment. Within seconds, she was out cold.

Like most nights since she had been hit over the head just after escaping the trap, her sleep was restless, interrupted by nightmares of being chased by the faceless blond man. This episode was cut short by a loud rap on her door that startled her awake.

The loud knocking started again, "One minute," she called. She looked in a mirror and noticed the sleep lines on her face. It felt as though she had only been out for a few minutes. It must have been longer though. She opened the door to find Robert standing there.

"Hello, Abby." Looking down and seeing her bathrobe he asked, "I can come back if you like. I am sorry."

"No, no, what is it?"

He looked up and down the hall, "Would you mind if I come in just for a few moments?"

She stood back and swung the door open to show him in. She closed the door behind him. Abby could tell he seemed nervous or unsure about something. After walking in the room he just stood, awkwardly, looking at her.

Finally he spoke, "We have been here before you know. Together."

"Oh?" She raised her eyebrows, eyes opened wide. "Really?"

"No, not like that. I just meant we have been in this room together before. Not that we have been *together*," he said, making the

air quotes. “Abby, last time we were here, you and I had quite the talk.”

“So, what did we talk about?”

“That is why I am here.” He pulled a sealed envelope from his pocket and held it up. “This is a letter that you wrote to yourself, before we wiped your memory. I assume I know most of what is in here based on the conversation we had, and I am willing to help you in any way I can. However, you gave me specific instructions to give this to you as soon as you got off the island, and that I am not to answer any questions you might have about your past. I also cannot answer any questions regarding why you may have left yourself any particular instructions.” He handed her the letter.

“Have you read this?”

“I have not. In my particular position, it is probably best that I do not know all the details. Besides, you filled me in on everything I need to know. I am glad that you made it back from the island, I truly am. But I have a feeling that your real adventure is just beginning.”

“I’ve already had quite the adventure. I woke up on some strange island and have been surviving there for the past month. Apparently, along the way, I somehow became some sort of amazing fighter. How does that happen?”

“Everyone gets trained. Life-saving skills, things that will serve you well on the island, but you had much more at stake than the average contestant and took your training much more seriously than I have ever seen anyone before. Given your particular situation, I arranged for extra hand-to-hand combat training. It served you well

on the island, and I think you will find that it will in the future, as well.”

She held the sealed envelope in her hand. Part of her wanted to rip it open; the rest of her could not possibly imagine what it might say. She may have even been a little scared to open it. “What exactly is your particular position? Are you some sort of talent wrangler for the show or something? Some rodeo clown to make sure we don’t get out of control?”

He laughed. “Something like that. Yes, as you have noticed, I try to keep things on track when I am on the island. I am not always there, though. I have many other things going on, but I am glad I was there for your stay.”

“What kind of other things do you have going on?”

“Well, I was not much of a public figure from the time that you remember. However, I am fairly well known now. I am a businessman, I guess you would say.”

“What kind of business?”

He laughed again, “Whatever kind makes me money. I started in travel and communications, but television has been my game for the last ten years. I own this show, Abby.” He gestured around them. “I finance all of this. The islands, the house, the show, pretty much everything.”

Abby was a bit stunned. “So this man that I’ve gotten to know, running through the woods and eating rabbit stew, turns out to be some sort of eccentric millionaire?”

“I have been called a lot of things, but eccentric is probably the

nicest. It would be eccentric billionaire actually, but who is counting?" he smiled. "I meant what I said though. I can help you, and I am willing to. Just let me know what you need. You should get dressed and come join us for now. Eric seems pretty lonely down there without you."

"Sure, I'll come down in a few. Just let me throw some clothes on."

He pointed. "They are in the top drawer, a few things that you brought with you at the beginning."

After Robert left, Abby walked back to the bed and sat down with the envelope in her hand. What could it possibly say? She assumed the day could not get any stranger, so she decided to stop procrastinating and opened it. As she took out the letter, a photo slid out and fell down to the floor, face down.

Bending to pick it up, she flipped it over and saw the face of a very handsome man. He was a little older, maybe in his late forties or early fifties. His face did not look familiar, but she recognized the blond hair instantly. She had been seeing it in her dreams for weeks. Her adrenaline started pumping. With her hand shaking, she put the photo down on the nightstand and opened the letter.

She did not have to read past the first word to know she was in trouble.

RUN!

RUN! Abby, run. If you're reading this, I know that you're a different person now. You're a survivor and a winner. You're strong. You must run. Do not have your memory restored. I can't stress how important it is that you do not have your memory restored. You probably feel like you're missing ten years. But trust me, it's a blessing. I don't want to say too much, but you fell in with the wrong people. There are things that you know that you cannot know. Lives depend on your ignorance, Abby. Do not return to California either. It's actually best if you do not return to the States at all.

Escape to the most remote place you can, and keep a low profile. Your winnings will be transferred to a secure account. Robert is aware of this; he helped set it up. He also knows you won't be having your memory restored. He is very rich, and very easy to find for those who will be trying to find you. You can trust him, but do not tell him the details of where you are going. No one can know. In your suitcase, tear open the back panel (it's being held on by Velcro) and remove the ID's and cash to get you to wherever you decide to go. I had some ideas on where you should go, but I didn't dare write them down. I'm sure whatever you... we... I? decide will be fine. It will have to be.

Last, and most important, always be ready. You have probably learned that I became very skilled with that knife when I was training for the show. If you're reading this, I'm guessing it has probably saved our life

once or twice. Always keep it with you. There is a photo of a man enclosed. You do not know who he is, but trust me when I tell you that that is for the best. I will not tell you his name, I don't want you getting cocky and trying to find him.

If you ever see this man, do not blink, do not flinch, do not hesitate for a second. Run. Run, or be killed. He has friends and contacts everywhere. Run far and fast, or he will find you. Do not let him speak to you, and do not believe a word that he says. He is very charming, and very convincing. I fear that if you let him try to reason with you, you are going to wind up right back where we started. You have no idea what has been sacrificed so that you can start over. Do not waste all of the effort that was necessary for this to happen.

I know you can do this. I hope I thought of everything. – Me

Abby read the letter again, and then again a third time, trying to make sense of it. What could have possibly happened in her life? What horrible road could she have gone down that “lives depend on her ignorance”? She picked up the photo from the nightstand and studied it. He did not look like a happy man, but certainly did not look like someone to be scared of. Then again, life is not a movie. The characters do not always look the part.

She was getting a fresh start. That does not happen often in life. Obviously, she had continued on her current path ten years ago and fell on some bad times since she got out of college, but that was in the past. Out of sight, out of mind. Literally forgotten. She felt a sense of freedom, like what she felt when she gave in and gave up in the whirlpool. There was nothing she could do to change the status of her

life at this moment. There was nothing more to do than just give in and accept it.

A loud knock on the door startled her out of her trance. She looked at the clock. An hour has passed since Robert left, and she was still in her robe. Standing up to answer the door, she put the photo down on the bed, then thought better of it and placed it in the top drawer of the nightstand.

Opening the door, her pulse quickened at the sight of Eric. His light brown sandy hair was combed, hanging just over his ears. He wore a sky blue shirt that made his bright blue eyes pop and brought out the deep tan he had acquired over the past month. His loose khaki pants and leather sandals completed the picture. He looked like every beautiful man she had ever seen in a vacation advertisement.

“You shaved,” she stood on her toes and rubbed her cheek against his smooth face. Bringing her lips to his, she kissed him very softly. “I like it,” she smiled.

“Not a lot of razors out on the island.”

She stepped back and lifted her robe enough to reveal her calf. “I shaved, too!”

He reached down and rubbed his cheek against her leg, giving it a soft kiss. “I like it.”

She smiled and laughed. “Not a lot of razors on the island.”

He lingered at her leg for a moment, before standing up. “You missed dinner.”

“I know. I wound up taking a little nap and, well, here I am.”

“Want to go find something to eat? There was plenty out there.

I'm sure we can find you a plate.”

Abby bit her bottom lip. Grabbing him by the front of his shirt, she slowly walked backwards into the room and kicked the door shut behind him.

Still holding his shirt and leading him into the room, she turned to him and whispered, “Do you realize we haven’t been alone together in a quiet place in nearly three weeks?”

He playfully asked, “Is that so?”

“The last time was that final night we were with Robert, the night before we set out for the beach to build the raft. Remember?”

He leaned toward her and tucked the damp hair behind her ear. With the lightest touch, he kissed her neck just below her ear, his lips barely grazing her skin. Placing his lips close, he whispered, “I remember.”

His breath against her neck gave her goose bumps, and when he kissed her again, she shook with a chill, although she was far from cold. Slowly she unbuttoned his shirt and ran a hand over his chest and down his flat stomach while he planted soft kisses slowly down the length of her neck, just a bit lower each time. When he got to the bottom of her neck, he continued down her shoulder, slowly inching her robe out of the way as he went.

With his free hand, he untied her robe with one pull and let it hang open. As he kissed her left shoulder, his fingertips lightly traced a line down the right side of her neck and continued down to her chest. If her pulse quickened when she had seen him at the door, it was racing now as his hand continued its journey, gliding down the

center of her breasts.

She slid her hand down his taut stomach to his loose khakis, where she found that he was no less excited than she was. He breathed in quickly when she touched him. Their mouths found each other, and his tongue lightly traced her lips before kissing her deeply. The feeling of their lips meeting, while their bare skin pressed against each other, sent electricity through her body.

Leaning forward, he gently kissed between her breasts where his fingers had been, as he knelt down in front of her. While his hand continued to trace a line down the center of her stomach, and slid below her waist, his lips followed. She closed her eyes and tried to hold onto the thick bedpost for balance as her leg began to quiver and her head rolled back as he teased exactly the right spots. Her robe fell to the floor.

He looked up at her impishly, his bright blue eyes twinkling in the dim light of the room. She looked down at him and smiled as she ran her fingers through his hair and down to his broad shoulders where she slipped off his unbuttoned shirt as it joined her robe on the floor. Abby knelt down with him, facing him, kissing his neck and working her way down to his chest, playfully biting his nipple. He was not wearing a belt, and after unbuttoning his top button, she slid his loose-fitting khakis below his waist. He smiled and sighed as she took him in her hand.

While they were still kneeling on the floor, she leaned in and whispered in his ear “That bed up there is much nicer than anything we’ve slept on in weeks.” She gently squeezed her hand tighter around

him and nibbled his earlobe. She felt his body nearly leap with excitement.

Without saying a word, he lifted her from the ground and set her down on the impossibly soft silk sheets. She pulled him onto the bed and pushed him onto his back, putting him exactly where she wanted him. She climbed on top of him. Their lips met first, and then their bodies pressed together. Little beads of sweat started to form on her forehead as she slid her body against his. Looking into his eyes, she saw the man with whom she had gone to hell and back; the man who had put his life on the line for hers.

She realized that she had been aching for this moment longer than she had allowed herself to admit. Judging by his reaction, he had been, too. As her hips settled over him, she felt him fill her completely. He ran his hands up her body, cupping her perfect breasts, as she eased against him. Pressing into him, Abby slowly moved back and forth in rhythm to their breathing, which was speeding along faster with each movement.

Both had anticipated this moment for so long. Their deep emotional connection started the first night they met when they barely escaped the cave with their lives. Their physical relationship had smoldered for weeks, and was suddenly bursting into an inferno. As she moved against him faster with each breath, neither stood a chance of savoring the moment for much longer.

Abby began to tremble, and felt her chest and neck become flush. She closed her eyes as she dug her nails into his chest, trying desperately to hold onto the moment for as long as she could. Every

nerve ending in her body tingled as her muscles tightened, and she felt a warm explosion of pleasure wash over her body. Every inch of her quivered as she contracted around him. He grabbed her hips with his strong hands and pulled her close, as his body tensed and he shuddered.

Abby collapsed onto his chest as they lay there, panting in unison, their skin moist. Neither moved for what seemed like an eternity, until Abby rolled off of his chest and snuggled close to him. They were lying in a bed that felt like a cloud, both completely satisfied, neither needing to say a word. They stayed this way for quite some time, satisfied and safe off the island, listening to the waves crash in the distance as a mild breeze caressed their bodies through the open window, both feeling complete.

Abby did not want to bring up the subject of the letter; she wanted to live in this moment forever, but she knew that she could not. Right now, Eric was one of her only friends in the world. As she lay next to him, she considered the letter and her impending life on the run. *If only I could freeze this moment in time.*

She asked, "Are you nervous about getting your memory back?"

"It's actually not that big a deal."

"Huh?"

He sat up, "You never gave me a chance to tell you. I already had it done."

"What? How? Robert made it sound like a really big deal."

Eric explained that after dinner he commented to Robert that

he did not want to wait until morning, and to his surprise, they readily agreed. “It was really easy, nothing to it. They sat me in a chair, there’s a doctor and some tech guys. They said that I was probably the easiest one they’ve ever done.”

“It sounded more complicated when he was talking about it before.”

“I guess it can be, but it wasn’t for me, given my fairly unique circumstance.”

Abby’s interest was piqued. “And what circumstance is that?”

He sighed, “Well... it would seem that my life has not changed a bit in ten years. There’s no shock to deal with, no dream to wake up from. I’m still living in the same crappy apartment, with my same loser buddies, swinging the same hammer. I’m on a different a jobsite than I thought I was, but that’s about it.” He sighed again, a little depressed at the thought, and then chuckled. “Funny story, though. One of us did wind up in Mexico. It just wasn’t me.”

Abby was naked and lying on his bare chest with her arm draped over him. “How do you feel about that?”

“Well, I like Mexico, but I’m glad I wasn’t the one who got dumped there passed out drunk.”

She playfully smacked his chest, “Not that. I mean how do you feel that you haven’t really moved on with your life in the last ten years?”

He laughed. “I actually feel great that I don’t need to go back to it, if that’s what you’re asking. I’m rich. I met a great girl. I’m getting a new start.”

She bolted up in bed and very seriously asked, “Who’s the girl?” He looked genuinely nervous for a second, but she could not keep a straight face, and they burst out laughing.

“I asked about you, if you could have it done tonight, too. Robert said your life was a bit more complicated and he would feel better about waiting until morning, when they can do it right.”

Abby sat in silence for a while, nervously running her fingers through his hair.

Robert was covering for her. He knew she would not be going through with the procedure, as simple as it may be. The room was lit only by the bright moonlight coming through the large, arched window on the wall. A tear ran down her cheek. She tried to wipe it before Eric noticed, but she could not move quickly enough.

“Hey, what’s wrong?”

The words caught in her throat, “Well, it seems I’m getting a fresh start, too.”

“I’m sure you are,” he said. He sat up and pulled her close to comfort her.

“No Eric, I know I am. I am not going to have my memory restored. I am *really* starting fresh.”

“What? Why?”

She explained the letter that she wrote to herself, and let him read it. She watched his face change from concern, to anger, to confusion. As he read through it a second time, he settled on understanding.

“Jeez.”

“I know.”

“We’ve been through a hell of a lot in the past month. I’m sure we’ll get through this.”

“Eric, don’t you get it? There is no *we*. I can’t go back to the States with you. I’ll stick around for the big finale, but after that, I’m on the run. I can’t even tell you where I’m going. I don’t even know where I’m going...” She threw up her hands and flopped backwards onto her pillow, exasperated at the thought.

Eric looked into her eyes, pushing a stray hair out of her face, “I don’t have to go back. What do I have to go back to? Let me come with you. If you can’t tell me where you’re going, just let me tag along.”

She thought about it. “You would do that?”

“Of course I would Abby. I love you.”

She laughed and cried all at once. Unable to wipe the giant smile off her face, she jumped on top of him and kissed him deeply as they sank back down into the bed together.

From three hundred yards away, Bryce watched though high-powered binoculars as they sank down into the bed and began another round of lovemaking. He muttered under his breath, “I’ll kill that little whore.”

WHEN ABBY AWOKE mid-morning, her stated goal was to spend as much time in bed as possible that day. With less than twenty-four hours until the finale, and her departure, she knew that she would not be enjoying these comforts for long. At the very least, she would be enjoying the comfort of having Eric by her side, so she took consolation in that.

Robert and the production team had other plans. She swore that his stated goal must have been to keep her on her feet for as much time as possible. The morning and early afternoon were spent running through rehearsals for the live finale that would be held at five a.m. local time the following day. This was so they could broadcast it live, and it would be in primetime back in the States.

The rehearsal was simple enough. For the most part they went over questions that Robert would ask during the interview portion. The live show was going to be early in the morning, so Robert wanted to make sure that they were on the ball. The early hour did not bother Abby or Eric. Having spent the last month sleeping under the stars for the most part, they were pretty well in tune with the natural rhythm of the day. What did bother them about the early hour was that the show would be coming to an end just before sunrise. They had hoped to make their disappearance immediately after the finale, under the cover of darkness.

On their way to a very late lunch, following the final run through of the day, Abby pulled Robert away from the rest of the group to finally talk.

“I read my letter last night.”

“And?”

“I’m not going to lie. I’m pretty freaked out. It sounds like I was scared out of my mind about this guy. What if he shows up here?”

“Abby, we are in the middle of nowhere, so I would not worry too much about that. But we did discuss this before, and you were concerned then, too. You said that he had a great many resources. I promised you that if you came back here I would have extra security on hand. Even though you do not remember that, I am a man of my word, and we called in extra security late last night. They will be with us for as long as you are.”

Abby thanked Robert. She had come to understand why she felt so familiar and comfortable with him when they were back on the island. He had told her that he was willing to help in any way he could, and she had thought of a way. Actually, she was mostly seeking advice. He knew the islands and the area better than she did. If he were going to disappear, how would he do it?

“That is a tough one,” he said. “Obviously I cannot know where you are going, so I cannot exactly tell you *where* would be the easiest place to disappear. That being said, there are over seven thousand islands out here, with roughly two thousand having people on them. Most of this area is very undeveloped. Relatively few of the inhabited islands are tied to the world at large.”

“I guess it is not a bad place to be if you don’t want to be found.”

“Certainly it would be difficult to find you, even if someone knew approximately where you were.”

“How would you say we go about finding a nice out of the way island somewhere?”

“That I do not know. I do not even know that you want to stay on an island. Understand? I do not know that. What I do know is that I have at least a half-dozen boats out in my little boatyard. With the exception of the yacht, the keys to all of them are usually right in the glove box. I own everything within two miles of where we are standing. I am not worried about theft, though it would be a shame if one were to disappear. I doubt anyone would even notice for a day or two. It would be even worse if it never came back because it sunk off the coast of someplace far from here, and the people aboard had to swim ashore and start their lives over. Would that not be tragic?”

“Absolutely,” Abby agreed.

“Hungry?”

“Starved.”

It was mid-afternoon, and after a satisfying lunch, Abby finally found her way back to her bedroom and enjoyed another long, hot shower. Drying off, she climbed into bed wearing only her underwear. She had never felt anything quite like these sheets, and she wanted to feel the softness against every inch of her body. She was exhausted, but lay awake enjoying the comfort of where she was. When she was a

little girl, imagining what it was like to be in heaven surrounded by clouds, this bed was what she pictured. While the warm late afternoon sun gleamed through the beautiful arched window on the west wall, she lay daydreaming about the possibilities to come.

She had money, she had a blank slate, and she was going to start over. Not only would she start over, but she would start over with Eric. There was a knock on the door. She assumed it must be him. He had said he was going to clean up and rest. It appeared he did not want to rest alone.

Abby called to the door, "Come in."

After a beat, the handle turned and jiggled a bit, but the door did not open.

"Hold on, I must have locked it."

She climbed out of bed and trotted to the door, enjoying the feeling of walking around mostly naked. In her prior life, this was not a habit of hers, but she found it very liberating. That, and she thought that her new body looked damned good without much on.

Abby was about to flip the deadbolt and swing open the door wearing only her panties and a smile, when something gave her pause. How did she know it was Eric? She remembered the letter she had written to herself. She had to keep her guard up. "Who is it?"

The muffled response from the other side of the door did nothing to answer her question. "Eric?" An unconvincing and muffled "Yes" came from the other side. Her eyes opened wide. Had someone already found her? *No, it has to be Eric... right?* She slid the chain lock into position on the door so that she could open it slightly without it

flying open. About to unlock the deadbolt, she had another thought and quickly pulled on a tank top. She unlocked the deadbolt and slowly turned the knob, ready to slam the door closed the second she saw anyone but Eric. Easing the door open just a crack, she braced herself to push back.

Fortunately she didn't have to, it was Eric, and the chain on the door confused him. "Sorry," she said, "Hold on. Wait, is there anyone else out there?"

He looked side to side, "No, are you expecting someone?"

She smiled before she closed and unchained the door. Quickly losing her tank top again, she tossed it to the side and swung open the door, striking a pose to reveal herself.

"Whoa!"

She pulled him in the room and pushed him toward the bed. "Like what you see?" she asked.

"What's not to like?"

They began kissing, and she jumped up on him, wrapping her legs around him. She pushed against him and immediately could feel that he did in fact like what he saw.

He laughed. "Alright, let me join you then!"

As he pulled his shirt up over his head there was a loud crash and the giant arched window shattered into a thousand pieces that showered the room. They both dove for the floor as shards of glass flew everywhere. There was the loud roaring of an engine outside, and the room filled with the fresh smell of the island air. The engine noise died out immediately, and a voice yelled up to the window asking if

everyone was all right.

Eric realized what had happened and walked over to the window. He was careful not to step on the glass, although he still had his shoes on. Looking through what used to be the window, he saw the grounds crew preparing the yard for the finale in the morning. He waived to a stout-looking local man who was standing on top of a riding lawn mower. The poor guy looked to be both terrified and concerned. "We're OK," Eric shouted.

"I am so sorry!" The man's panic came through his heavy accent. "I heard the glass shatter. I do not know what happened. The mower must have kicked up a rock or something. Is everyone all right up there?"

Eric waived and called back, "We're fine." He turned around and said to Abby, "You better put some clothes on. My guess is there are a whole bunch of folks heading this way."

He was right. Abby pulled on her shorts just as the cavalry arrived and began pounding on the door. They assured security they were fine. No one was bleeding or was hit by any glass. A couple of the men walked around the room looking for whatever shattered the glass. When they wrapped up, one of the men apologized and told them a cleaning crew would come by to take care of the glass. For now, they might want to find someplace else to be.

Abby was getting together a few things when Robert arrived with the cleaners. "I am so sorry," he said. "They told me you two are fine, though? No one was hurt?"

"We're fine," Abby said.

“Good! I would hate for you to make it off the island just to catch a piece of glass in your eye while you are a guest in my house. I will have them make up another room for you, for tonight.”

“No need,” she said, “I have a place to stay.” She smiled at Eric.

Robert beamed. “That is damned adorable. America is going to eat this up!”

The window incident had given them a scare and killed the mood for a while. However, after dinner, when they found themselves back in Eric’s room, they managed – quite easily – to rekindle the fire that they had started earlier. Afterward, Eric began to snore while Abby lay in his arms. She giggled a little bit. Never having heard him snore before, she figured that she must have really worn him out. There was something comforting in the sound as she drifted off herself.

Abby opened her eyes in the middle of the night with an uneasy feeling. She felt a hand on her shoulder from behind. She knew it was not Eric’s hand. He was in front of her in the same dead-to-the-world position he had been in when they fell asleep. Without as much as a flinch, she rolled over to see one of the security men next to the bed. She recognized him from earlier, but did not know his name. He was the tallest of the bunch. With his dark hair, dark eyes, and dark suit, he certainly looked the part.

He held his finger over his lips and motioned for her to follow him. She slid out of bed. He watched unapologetically as she slipped on Eric’s T-shirt to cover herself. *Creep*. She followed him out of the

room and into a sitting room across the hall where he nodded to another security man as then entered the room.

“Sit down,” he pointed to a plush leather chair.

“I’d just assume stand. What’s going on?” She figured it was about the blond-haired man. Maybe they had some sort of lead on him, or worse, he was here somewhere. Why else wake her up in the middle of the night?

“Have a seat.”

She sat with a huff that was unnecessary. The thick leather chair let out its own sigh. “Is this about that guy?”

“What guy? You will have to be more specific.”

“The blond-haired guy. The one that you’re supposed to keep away from me.”

He laughed. “Oh yes, that guy.” He sat down in front of her and pulled his gun from its holster under his jacket. Abby sat up straight. “That man is your husband, and he is my employer,” he paused. “You look surprised. I was told that you might not remember that little detail, or much else for that matter. Know this. He is very powerful, and he has people everywhere. There is nowhere he won’t find you. Do you understand?”

Abby sat motionless, staring at the floor, absorbing that detail. *The man in the picture is my husband. I am running from my husband.*

“Tell me you understand.”

“I understand,” she said, without lifting her head.

“So this is the plan. In a few hours, they’re going to get you out of bed, get you made up, and put you on national television for the

finale. Immediately following that, you will come with me. We will leave here to return to your husband. We will go quickly and quietly. We will leave without anyone noticing. Tell me you understand.”

“I understand.”

“Good. Just so we’re clear, I’ve been watching you on the show. You handle yourself pretty good, but don’t be fooled. There are more of us than there are of you. Your husband does not want us to hurt you, so we won’t. However, if you do not cooperate, your new boyfriend will pay the consequence. Do you understand?”

Again, Abby sat motionless, staring at the floor. She felt a helpless and familiar feeling. She felt trapped. The man put his gun against her forehead and used it to push her head back, lifting up her chin, until her eyes met his. She never flinched. She never blinked. She spoke as if they were idly chatting over coffee in the kitchen, “Why not just take me now?”

Without lifting the gun from her head he said, “Excuse me?”

“Why not just take me now? You don’t have to threaten Eric or anyone else. You and I can walk out the front door and be gone before anyone is the wiser.”

“It’s not that simple.” He removed the gun and holstered it. He could not believe how cool she was in spite of a gun to her head. “Follow the plan. No one gets hurt.” He gestured for her to stand and return to Eric’s room. “I will see you in the morning. Sleep tight.”

Abby spent the next several hours lying in bed, staring at the ceiling, wondering how she was going to find a way out of this one.

A FEW HOURS LATER they were up and getting ready. Abby was in her underclothes, strapping her knife to her thigh. She had not worn it since they got off the island, but in anticipation of what was going to transpire over the following few hours, she felt she should have it at her side.

She had been provided a rack of clothing options to wear to the finale. She settled on a mostly white, flowery sundress, mainly because it was long enough to conceal her weapon but offered fast access if she needed it. *When* she needed it, she reminded herself.

Abby slipped it on over her head as she heard a knock on the door. The knock came again almost right away. As she walked over, she lifted the edge of her dress, releasing the safety latch on her knife and grasping the handle. Opening the door just a crack she saw that it was Robert. She let the dress slide back down to cover the knife as she opened the door to greet him.

“Are you excited, or nervous? I suppose it can be both. I’m excited!” It was clear when he entered the room that he had more than his share of morning coffee. “We took care of the paperwork yesterday; the financials are all set. You can check your account right now and see that the money is in there.”

“I trust you.”

“Good! And you remember the account numbers?”

Abby tapped her temple. “They’re locked in.”

“Good then.” He studied her face and tilted his head sideways.

She suddenly felt self-conscious. “What?”

“What’s wrong?” he asked.

Abby raised an eyebrow. “What?”

“You forget, Abby, we know each other much better than you think. We spent nearly three months together before we were island bound. I can tell something is wrong. What is it?”

She considered telling him about her visitor last night, but decided against it. She trusted Robert, but she did not know whom else she could trust. The man who threatened her was part of Robert’s security team, likely one of the extra guys brought in to protect her. Ironic. He said that her husband had people everywhere. For all she knew, there were a dozen guys on this island ready to act. Who knew what would happen if Robert blew the whistle and the wrong one heard it?

“Nothing. I’m just nervous, that’s all.”

“Do not be. You have been on camera in front of tens of millions of people already, and you were great. They love you.”

“That’s not what I’m nervous about. After the show, immediately after, I’m planning to leave. Is that alright with you?”

“Well, obviously I would prefer that you stick around for awhile, and do the talk show circuit, either via teleconference here, or you could fly back to the States. Given the situation, though, I figured you would not be doing that. I was thinking about it, and I think it will add to your mystique. It suits you.” He put his hand on her shoulder. “I will miss you, but you know you can always call on me.”

Before Robert left, he reminded her that a show runner would soon bring her to have her hair and makeup finished. When Eric came out of the bathroom, he found Abby sitting on the edge of the bed.

“Who were you talking to out here?”

“Robert.”

Eric thought her voice sounded stiff and sad, and didn’t come with the usual joy with which she said Robert’s name. “What’s wrong?”

Abby shook her head. “Just nervous, that’s all.”

“Don’t worry about it. You’re a natural. Nothing to worry about. Just give them that beautiful smile and the audience will be yours.”

Abby wrapped her arms around his waist and looked into his eyes, “You are serious about coming with me and starting over?”

He assured her that he was.

“We are going to have to go quickly once the show is over.”

“Why is that?”

She debated on telling him about last night, but if she told him, he might insist they leave now. She decided not to. “I’m worried that he will show up,” she said. “I just want to get out of here as quick as we can. When the interview is done, we walk off stage, bolt to the boats and take off.” It was not a great plan, but it was simple. The best kind.

“I like it. If anyone sees us, they’ll think it is just part of the show, the two of us riding off into the sunset together.”

She smirked. At this time of day it would be a sunrise, which

would be even more fitting.

Abby never imagined that so many people would be at the finale. The audience seemed to be made up of mostly local people and crew from the production team. It was nearly five in the morning local time, and the sky in the background was still dark, but that would not last too long. The stage was simply set with several chairs for Robert, Abby and Eric. It was flanked on either side by giant screens where the people in attendance would watch the final broadcast.

There would not be a live feed from the stage to show Abby and Eric until after the first part of the broadcast, when the viewing public would assume that they were dead. The episode picked up the night when Abby had found Emily's camp and was surprised by Eric. It seemed like a lifetime ago, but in fact, only a few days had passed.

Seeing Emily living and breathing on the giant screen was difficult for both of them. Abby tried to fight back the tears, but a few ran down her cheek as she watched Emily untie her. This woman was completely unaware that she would lose her life in a few days. She was just as unaware that Abby was about to try to end it in a few short moments. Thankfully Eric had intervened, and Abby did not have to live with that mistake.

Still, she could not shake the feeling that Emily should have been sitting here on the stage with them. It was such a tragedy. Were it not for Abby and Eric, Emily would have lived out the next few weeks on the island and won when she hit the one-year mark. Instead, she was in a casket being transported home to her grieving family.

She tried to blot the tears from her eyes with her fingers, but all she managed to do was smudge her make-up. A stagehand, or more likely a makeup artist, came out and dabbed her cheeks with a sponge. After quickly but gently touching up her makeup, he grasped her hand and said, "Be strong." It was the nervous look in his eyes that caught her attention.

When he had walked away, Abby looked down into her hand to find a small folded piece of paper in her palm. She discretely opened and read it. After reading the few words twice, she looked up to see Eric looking at her. He just about had a question mark painted across his face. She gave him a nervous glance as the commercial ended and the show came back to life on the giant screens.

The rest of the prerecorded broadcast went as planned, though Abby was not paying any attention to it. Her mind was elsewhere, trying to figure out their escape. She should have at least told Eric and Robert that her husband was here with a small army to snatch her. It was too late now though.

Robert asked, "Are you both ready?"

This snapped Abby out of her trance, though the look on her face told Robert that she was in full-fledged panic mode.

"This is nothing," he smiled. "Just like in rehearsal. Follow my cues, and you will be absolutely fantastic. Nothing to worry about."

When they came back from commercial, Robert did a short introduction, explaining what they just saw on the screen and the tragedy that might have been. When the camera opened up to show Abby and Eric sitting with him, the couple of hundred people in the

audience went crazy. No doubt the millions sitting in their living rooms across the country did as well. The producers had really played up the danger and the impossibility of the two of them escaping the cavern. The last shot they had seen prior to the commercial was of Emily's body floating hundreds of yards out to sea.

Abby saw the two of them up on the giant screen. They certainly looked the part of celebrity, thanks to the hair and makeup teams. They were a far cry from the filthy, sweaty, unwashed people that had been running around on the screen for the past hour.

It was all so surreal, made more so by the note that she held in her sweaty palm:

At the end of the show, when the lights go out, kiss Eric and tell him that you need to use the ladies room. Quickly walk off of the right side of the stage. I will be there to escort you.

When she first read it, she hoped it was a last-minute instruction from the producers. She knew that was not that case, though. This was from the security man that she has spoken with in the middle of the night.

After Robert asked a few questions to Eric that she did not hear, the screen came to life again to tell the story of how they escaped on the raft. When the show came back after another commercial, Robert started with the questions again.

"So you two have become quite the thing," Robert announced, "Any plans to stay together now that you are off the show?" Abby had

kept her marriage hidden and never discussed it in any of the pre-show interviews that had aired leading up to her arrival on the island. None of the producers saw any reason to make it public now, especially given the love story that had developed.

Abby realized that while her mind was elsewhere, the show had continued on and Robert had moved to the interview portion. She cleared her throat and smiled, "We barely know each other, Robert."

He laughed. "But you have been through so much together! And he is a pretty good looking guy, wouldn't you say?"

The women in the audience whooped and hollered loudly.

Robert played it up. "Eric, if this one does not keep you around, I do not think you will have any trouble finding a date."

The women cheered louder and some started whistling.

Abby spoke up when they calmed down a bit. "Hey, let's not start making other plans just yet. We *have* been through quite a lot, Robert, you're right. I'm sure we'll keep in touch."

Eric feigned a hurt look and clutched his heart, hamming it up for the camera. The three of them laughed, just like in the rehearsal, then Abby grabbed the back of Eric's head and brought him close for a steamy kiss. The audience went crazy, whistling and hollering.

Robert finally spoke up. "Alright you two, I think there are kids at home watching. That's enough."

As they pulled apart, Abby found herself smiling. Genuinely smiling. The thought hit her like a truck: She loved this man. Unable to decide if that made her terrified or happy, she settled on a little bit of both.

They looked out into the audience to smile and wave as Robert announced that they were taking a quick commercial break and would be right back. Abby kissed Eric again for the cameras as they were cutting the live feed. As she pulled away, that is when she spotted him. Sitting in the audience on the far right corner of the stage was the man she had spoken with last night. Seated directly behind him was the blond-haired man from her nightmares. Her husband.

HE WAS WEARING thick-framed glasses, and it appeared he had been growing out a beard for a couple of weeks, but it was definitely him. It was not that clever a disguise. She wondered how Robert's security team could not have spotted him. Then she recalled that his usual security team was just a few guys. He did not have much to worry about on this remote island. The small army that he had brought in the past day was likely made up of her husband's people. Her husband. She did not even know his name.

She took a deep breath as the red light on the camera indicated they were about to go live again. Once again, Robert started with Eric. He was such a big hit with the ladies, it did not really matter much what he said, as long as he smiled that bright, charismatic Texas grin when he was done.

Abby reached down with her right hand and placed it on her thigh where her knife was. She was comforted to know it was there. Her mind was overwhelmed trying to think through the situation. The man had been clear: they would not hurt her, but they would hurt Eric if she did not go quietly.

Looking around the edges of the crowd, she counted at least a dozen men in dark suits with earpieces in, just like the man she had spoken with last night. She had to assume they were all working for her husband. Who knew how many more might be out of her sight?

Abby decided she could not go through with trying to escape. She was in love with Eric, and she would be damned if he was going to be hurt or killed on her account if she could help it. She had to go alone, and go willingly. She was sure that once they were away from the island, and Eric was out of danger, she could figure out an escape plan. If she could not, at least she could take comfort knowing he was safe.

They stood as Robert announced them as the winners of *Trial Island*, and the first to ever escape. The audience went crazy as streamers and confetti rained down on them. They kissed as the lights and music pulsed around them. Abby never wanted the kiss to end. She wrapped her arms around his neck and pulled him close. She was savoring their kiss, and soaking in the moment. It very well may be the last time she felt his lips.

As they pulled away, the lights went dark. The live feed was over, but it seemed more like the power had gone out. All of the lights were off, even back at the house. Only the dim glow of the tiki torches all around penetrated the darkness. There was confusion on either side of the stage as well as from the cameramen in front as the crew frantically inspected their equipment.

Without saying a word, Abby took the opportunity to scoot down and off the right side of the stage while Robert and Eric tried to find out what happened. She felt the security man take her by the elbow as soon as her feet hit the ground. He led her further to the right and behind a long row of tall hedges. They were made to separate the garden where they had just been filming from the beach

area below. Once on the other side, they took a left toward the small boatyard. Thirty seconds after she had broken off their kiss, she was completely out of sight. She had a feeling she knew where they were going.

The moment they were out of view, she was grabbed from behind and lifted off the ground. She found her small frame being carried like a football, under the arm of an impressively large man. He kept a massive hand clamped over her mouth. She was a small woman, but it was still remarkable how fast he could run carrying her extra weight. There were two other men running behind them.

Over the din of the confused crowd, she could hear one voice perfectly clear. It was Eric yelling out for her.

“Where did she go?” Eric looked at Robert, who appeared equally confused.

“I don’t know. She was just here.”

Eric yelled out again, “Abby!”

Robert went to ask someone off stage if they saw where she went. Eric was busy scanning the crowd, trying to find her. He had a feeling in his gut that something was wrong. Less than two minutes ago she was standing right next to him. Did someone grab her with him standing right there? “Damn it!” He yelled, kicking a pile of confetti on the ground.

That is when he saw her chair. There were a couple of bright yellow and red pieces of confetti that had landed on the chair where Abby had been sitting. Right in the middle was a small piece of white

paper looking completely out of place. He walked over and picked it up. Turning it over in his hands, he unfolded it and read the message. "Son of a bitch." He glared toward the right corner of the stage. She was not there, but she could not have gotten far.

He jumped off the stage and asked some of the crew if they saw where she went. None of them had any idea, but all of them wanted a picture with him. He shoved two men out of the way who would not take a polite, "Not right now," for an answer.

Climbing back up onto the stage, he looked around some more. The row of tall shrubbery on the right side of the stage ran for a hundred yards, maybe more, in a perfectly straight line across the property going toward the boatyard. On the other side of the tall shrubbery he saw the head of an even taller man. The man was at about the halfway mark, moving very quickly toward the boat docks. "Gotcha."

Eric jumped off the stage again and ran to the break in the hedge where two security men stopped him. He explained that Abby was in trouble. They shook their heads no and said that everything was under control.

"No, you don't understand, just let me..."

The men looked at each other. One turned to Eric and said, "Come with us, sir." One of the men took Eric by the arm, but he shook him off.

"No thanks" he said.

"Sir, come with us." Each man grabbed an arm to bring him to the other side of the hedge.

“What the hell do you think your doing?” Eric demanded, trying to shake them off. He looked back, but he was too far from the crowd for anyone to have noticed. He was about to call out to Robert, but he froze when felt something hard and metal press into his ribcage.

“That’s what I thought,” one of the men said. “Walk with us.”

Eric did as he was told. Once on the other side and out of sight, Eric felt the high voltage of a Taser under his arm, and he dropped to the ground.

The big man was strong, but his left arm was growing tired. He stopped, but kept his hand over her mouth. “Tape her mouth shut so I can carry her on my shoulder.” He turned as one of the men took out a roll of silver tape.

As he turned, Abby saw two other security men a couple hundred feet away. They were near the opening of the hedge that they had gone through a few minutes ago. They were carrying a third man between them. The man they were carrying obviously could not walk on his own. She quickly recognized Eric and became furious. If they were going to hurt him anyway, she was not about to go down without a fight.

The giant man was still holding her under his arm. Though he was tired, he was still much stronger than she was. She wriggled trying to get her arms out, but he just tightened his grip. His big sweaty palm covering her face gave her all the inspiration she needed. She worked her mouth open and bit down as hard as she could,

sinking her teeth into the meat of his hand. He screamed and dropped her.

The other men were both shocked. One rushed toward her from several feet away to pin her to the ground before she could stand up. He realized his mistake too late as he saw a flash of steel a split second before her knife cleaved his right ear from the side of his head. He clutched the side of his skull in agony and dropped to his knees. Standing and spinning, she swiftly brought the butt of her knife down behind his left ear, knocking him to the ground, unconscious.

The giant had recovered from his initial shock and backhanded Abby. His fist felt like a sledgehammer, and she left her feet, flailing backwards onto the ground. She landed on her back where she lay still, seemingly unconscious herself. He quickly stepped over to take advantage of her position and disarm her. When he got close enough, she opened her eyes and drove her blade into the soft tendons behind his left ankle. Screaming in anguish, he dropped to the ground like a three hundred pound sack of potatoes.

Springing up, she heard the cock of a gun. Raising her eyes, she came face to face with the man from her nightmares. Her husband stood just a few feet away with a very large gun pointed directly at her chest. She had a feeling that if he wanted to pull the trigger, he would not hesitate. Looking into his eyes, a memory flashed back. She was tied up, naked, and sobbing. He was laughing and putting his pants back on.

His voice snapped her back to reality, "Recognize me, do you? I thought you weren't supposed to remember me? I must have left an

impression.”

Smiling, he slowly walked toward her, never moving the gun. The giant lay writhing at her feet, the other man motionless where she had left him. The third security man stood next to her husband, his gun out, pointing at her.

Bryce stopped when his gun came firmly against her breast, finger still against the trigger. Abby did not flinch, even though he pressed so hard that it hurt. Reaching down with his other hand, he grasped the handle of the knife. She held on hard. Bryce hissed through his teeth, “Let go, or Eric does not see the sunrise.”

He tossed the knife to the side with a chuckle. Grabbing the back of her head, he kissed her hard and wet. When she fought against him, he dug the gun into her chest harder and made his hand behind her head into a fist, slowly tearing the hair from her scalp. Finally, she stopped fighting. Using the fistful of hair, he yanked her face away from his and spit on her.

“You’re feistier than you were last time I saw you. I like that.” His face contorted into a disgusting sneer.

She was sickened that this man was her husband. How had she become a person who would wind up with a man like this?

“You and I are walking to the dock now, quickly.” Just then, four other security men came running up to where they stood. He instructed two of them to follow him, and the others to clean up the mess before anyone came along.

He pushed Abby in front of him and commanded her to walk. She reluctantly did as she was told, trying to figure a way out. There

was no one else within eyesight in front of her. She looked over her shoulder, not at Bryce, but past him, searching for Eric.

“Don’t worry about him,” he said. “He won’t be joining us.”

“Where are we going?”

“Oh, I’m thinking about taking one of these boats and going for a little vacation on one of these beautiful islands.”

“That sounds nice,” she practically purred. She looked in his eyes, trying to be coy.

“*I’m* thinking about a little vacation. You, my dear, are going to go for a little swim once we’re a couple of miles out.”

Just a few feet from the docks, Abby pretended to trip over something and did a little hop step. Spinning back toward Bryce, she swung her fist, catching nothing but air. He ducked, popped up, and clubbed her in the temple with the butt of his gun. Not hard enough to knock her out, but he was sure she was seeing stars. One of his men caught her before she could fall to the ground.

He grabbed her by the face, squeezing her cheeks together painfully hard. He was so close to her that she could smell the hate on his breath, even if she could not focus her eyes on him. He was insane. She had no idea what to expect from him, and could see why she had instructed herself to run at all costs. He was a nightmare. There was no doubt in her mind that he fully intended to murder her out on the water.

He whispered with a rage-fueled intensity, “Straighten up, turn around and walk. Try anything like that again, and I’ll shoot you. I won’t kill you just yet, but you won’t have the option to fight back.

Eric will be dead, and we will be ten miles out before anyone is the wiser.” He let go of her face, and then gave her a hard slap for good measure.

Abby turned and staggered onto the dock. Overcome by defenselessness and anger, her head was spinning. She was barely able to stand up on her own, much less walk. She stopped in front of the first boat. She was about to turn and ask if this was it, when Bryce violently shoved her from behind. Leaving her feet, she collapsed onto the deck of the boat. When she landed her dress came up over her hips. She pulled it down as she lay there trying not to cry.

Bryce laughed as he jumped down onto the deck of the boat, “That is more like it. That’s the Abby I know and love. Just a sad little slut, aren’t you?” He lifted up her dress and repeatedly smacked her hard on the ass while she tried to bat his hand away. “I took you in. I gave you a good life, and this is how you repay me? You took off without a word, and I had no idea where you were until you showed up on national television. Running around some island with another man to make it worse.”

She sat up at the mention of Eric. “He is twice the man you are.”

He grabbed her by the arm and lifted her off the deck so her back was to him. He jammed his gun into her ribs and bent her over a bench. “That memory of yours, it’s not doing so well is it? Don’t worry, sweetie, I’ll remind you one last time just how much man I really am.”

He turned to the two security men who were still standing on

the dock and told them to head back. He could take care of this himself. He instructed them to make sure there were no loose ends. One of them turned to walk away, the other hesitated.

“Mr. Haydenson, I’ve seen her on the show. She can take care of herself. Are you sure you want to be alone with her? Maybe at least one of us should come with you.”

Bryce nodded his head and motioned for him to come down onto the boat. “That’s a good idea... Ted is it?”

“Greg, sir.”

“Greg. Good idea, Greg.” He clapped Greg on the shoulder and turned to Abby, “Don’t you think that’s a good idea?” Turning back to the unsuspecting young man, Bryce kneed him in the stomach, then slammed his fist into the back of his head when he was doubled over, knocking him to the ground. He grabbed him by the collar, lifting him off the ground, only to pound his face until it was so bloodied and mangled that it was barely recognizable.

“Stand up Greg,” Bryce commanded. When Greg stood, Bryce punched him one more time in the face, sending him backwards over the side of the boat and into the water. He looked at the other man still standing on the dock. “Questions?”

“No sir.”

“Take care of this.” He looked at Abby who was sitting on the deck, horrified. “Sorry you had to see that, sweetie. People need to know their place. You used to know your place. I don’t know what the hell happened.” He paused, “Weren’t you happy? Of course you weren’t. Whores are never happy.” He reached into his pocket, taking

out a pair of shiny steel handcuffs and threw them at her, hitting her in the head, “Here, put these on.”

ERIC OPENED HIS EYES. It was dark, and he was confined and disoriented. He could not figure out exactly where he was or how long he had been there, but it only seemed like a few minutes ago he was talking to those security men. He tried to sit up, but smacked his head on something hard and metal. He let out a muffled yelp and went to grab his head. That was when he felt a pain under his arm and realized his wrists were bound together with duct tape and his mouth was covered.

Shit. He remembered now.

He could hear voices just a few feet away. One of them sounded like Robert. He could not figure out who the others were. One of them raised his voice. Then they all did. Suddenly, there were two thuds directly above him on the metal. Seconds later, the lid of the car trunk popped open and Robert looked down, smiling at him.

Bryce found the key to the ignition and started up the boat. It was a big one. Abby did not know much about boats, but when he turned the ignition and the engines roared to life, it was clear that this was a boat built for speed. It was a long boat and Bryce was having trouble maneuvering it away from the dock.

“Eric!” Abby screamed out without thinking as she saw him run onto the dock.

Bryce turned and fired his gun. Abby lunged at him, hitting him with her bound hands. He smacked her on the side of the head, and she dropped to the deck on her backside. As Eric and Robert dove to the ground, Bryce hit the throttle and the boat awkwardly lurched forward.

Eric stood and raced down the dock as the boat sped up and pulled away. He dug deeper, pumping his legs to their limit. His calves and thighs burned. His feet were barely able to keep up with their own speed, and he worried that he would trip over himself with each stride. The boat would have to slow down for just a moment to turn the corner out toward the ocean when it reached the end of the dock. Pushing his body to its breaking point, he flew down the dock to get there in time.

Just as the boat turned the corner, Eric launched himself into the air. Arms and legs flailing, he landed with a crash on the deck, just as Bryce gunned the engines to launch the boat toward the open sea. Bryce turned around, hearing the commotion, just in time to see Eric coming up behind him. Eric was off balance and threw a punch that Bryce ducked before landing a right jab into Eric's ribcage.

To Abby's surprise, Eric fell down and landed in front of her. Winded, he did not get up right away. Bryce tossed a length of rope toward her and pulled out his gun. The other end of the rope was still lashed to the boat. "Tie him up. You can watch him go for a swim before you join him."

She knelt down next to Eric and stroked his hair. "Are you alright?"

He winked at her and jerked his head to the side. Her knife was lying on the deck just a few feet away. He had picked it up off the ground on his mad dash to catch them, and tossed it in front of him into the boat so he would not accidentally land on it and stab himself.

She smiled back and winked as she slid her right hand out of its handcuff, having left it just loose enough that she would be able to slip it out. He should have put the handcuffs on her himself. She was not the helpless little girl Bryce thought she was, and she was about to prove it. Making sure that he was watching the water and not them, she leaned over with as little motion as possible, and picked up her knife.

Grasping it tightly, she sprung from her crouched position and lunged at him, intending to sink the steel into his shoulder blade. He saw her coming out of the corner of his eye and sidestepped at the last second so that she fell into the wheel, sending the boat lurching to the right and throwing everyone off balance. Eric sprung up at the same moment and landed a solid punch into Bryce's gut. He barely flinched before connecting a left hook to Eric's jaw. As Eric hit the ground, Bryce aimed his gun and fired two shots.

Abby slammed into him from the side just as he did so, causing the bullets to miss, if only barely. Eric jumped up and tackled Bryce, sending him over the captain's chair, his back landing on the throttle. The twin engines at the back of the boat roared as they redlined and the nose of the boat pitched up sharply. Abby was sent toppling to the deck as Eric tumbled over the back of the boat and into the water. Abby screamed as he disappeared in the wake.

Still holding onto her knife, Abby grasped the side of the boat, struggling to stand. Bryce was still over the back of the captain's chair struggling to get up. His back was against the wheel and the throttle. His legs dangled over the back of the chair, like a child's legs dangling over the side of a swimming pool.

Holding steady to the side of the boat, she brought her right arm over her head in a long arch, bringing the knife down and driving it deep into his left leg, just above the kneecap. Violently she twisted her knife as his screams momentarily drowned out the roar of the massive engines. She felt the popping and twisting of his muscles and tendons. As he raised his right hand to fire his gun at her, she twisted again, harder. The pain overcame him and his hand shook uncontrollably as it dropped his gun to grab his leg.

Ripping the knife from his knee, she grabbed his short blond hair and held the blood-soaked blade to his neck, commanding him to stand up. He pulled himself up, tears streaming down his face from the pain. His skin was gray, having lost any bit of color it may have had. Abby let go of his hair momentarily to back the throttle down. As she turned back to Bryce, she saw the flashing lights of a police boat coming up in the distance.

She screamed in his face, "You get off on beating up little girls?"

He said nothing. He looked to be moments away from passing out.

She didn't realize it, but her firm grasp on his hair was about the only thing holding him up and he collapsed to the deck under the

intense pain. She stepped on his injured leg and lowered her knife to his crotch as he screamed in agony. The police boat had stopped a few hundred feet away, but the lights reflected and bounced off the water and the gleaming surfaces of the boat.

As she pressed the tip of her knife hard into his pants she asked, “You see those lights? That’s the only reason I don’t cut off your dick right now, you sorry sack of shit.” She made him roll over and lay face down on the deck. Abby stood next to him, her left foot pressing down on his injured leg, causing him as much pain as she possibly could while waiting for the police boat to pull up alongside them.

Eric and Robert, followed by several policemen, jumped onto the boat. Eric grabbed her in a soaking wet embrace. “Thank God you’re alright.”

The police tied a tourniquet on Bryce’s thigh, and crudely bandaged the huge gash above his knee. By the time they lifted him to move him onto their boat his eyes were closed, and he could only moan in pain. After the police loaded Bryce onto their boat they said something to Robert in a language that neither Abby nor Eric understood. Robert and one of the officers conversed for a few minutes.

Robert turned to them. “He wants to know if I need to ride back with them?”

Abby was silent as they floated there. She looked at the island behind them. The thought of being on the same island as her husband made her stomach turn. When she remembered the huge number of

men he seemed to have working for him that were on the island, that sealed the deal. “You should ride back with them.”

He thought about it for a moment. “You should come back with me. Stay for a few days. These men are going to have some questions for you.”

Abby shook her head. “How badly are they going to want to ask me some questions?”

Robert smiled. “I have a little influence around here. I think I might be able to help you with that.”

“Then I have to go with my gut, Robert. I’m not going back there.”

Eric agreed. “Who knows how many guys he’s got with him? Why chance it?”

“Where are you going to go?”

Abby smiled. “I can’t tell you that.”

“How long do you think he’ll be locked up?” Eric asked, gesturing toward the police boat.

“Like I said, the laws are pretty lax around here. I know you do not know much about your husband, Abby, but he is well connected. I will do what I can, but if he spends more than a couple days in custody, I would be surprised.” He looked at Abby. “You remember those account numbers?”

She tapped her head.

“And you have absolutely everything you need?”

Looking at Eric, she answered, “Absolutely.”

“Alright then.” He shrugged his shoulders, not sure what to say.

His eyes were glassed over as if he was struggling not to cry.

Abby hugged him tight and kissed him on the cheek. “Thank you. For everything.”

To both of their surprise, Eric did the same thing.

Robert was back on the police boat, which pulled away and sped back toward the island as he watched from the back and waved to them one last time. After a few minutes, the sound of the police boat engines died out, and the flashing lights were nothing but a distant flicker. Abby and Eric were alone on their boat without another person in sight. They held each other for a long time as the boat bobbed gently in the water and the sky began to lighten. As the sun crested the horizon and the orange early morning beams shone on their faces, it revealed a clear and cloudless sky.

Eric fired up the engines, and they began cruising. They had no particular destination in mind, just away from where they had come. He stood behind the wheel with Abby by his side, her arms wrapped around him.

“Where to?” he asked smiling, looking out toward the endless sea.

She looked up at him and smiled. “A new life.”

Bringing him close, she kissed him as she ran her fingers through his thick sand-colored hair.

A new life.

Epilogue

ABBY AND ERIC lay in bed, their bodies covered by thin silk sheets. The ocean breeze gently drifted through the French doors that opened onto the beach and the water in the distance. Since being hit in the head back on the island, Abby had been having dreams about her past. They were spotty and lacked detail, but were clearly lost memories trying to surface. They revealed that her life with Eric was better than any life she had ever had before.

Ten months ago, after they parted ways with Robert, they cruised south for several days stopping only to gas up the boat a few times, buy food, and purchase an inflatable raft. They drifted a few hundred yards off the coast of what looked like a fairly busy island one night, and over dinner, decided that this would make a good spot to start their new journey. In the middle of the night, they inflated their raft and Eric swam under the boat with an oversized screwdriver, removing the engine compartment plugs. They disabled the bilge pumps that had been keeping the water at bay, which had been trying to flood the lower compartments of the boat since Bryce had sent two bullets through the deck and hull. The compartments flooded within a couple of hours, and the boat eased under the water to the bottom of the ocean as they watched from their raft.

After paddling to shore and spending a few days on the island, they spent the next several weeks hopping ferries and water taxis from

island to island. They were searching for a small, quiet place to call home. They landed here and have not left since. They live in a small villa on an isolated beach, where they spent their days on an extended honeymoon. The locals were mostly farmers and families. There was one television in the village that only got reception on the clearest of days; otherwise there was no connection to the media. It was truly and completely off the grid. Given the lack of communication with the outside world, it was nearly impossible for anyone on the island to know who they were. If any of them did, no one ever let on.

They had learned that they were on one of the more remote islands of the seven thousand islands that spanned three hundred square miles. Although the chance of being found here was extremely remote, Abby still found herself looking over her shoulder and locking the doors for several months. Not anymore. She finally felt safe.

Abby snuggled close in to Eric, enjoying what had become their routine afternoon nap. She loved the feeling of being close to him. She often thought how lucky she was to have found herself on that island, nearly a year ago, lost and afraid. She had grown into a stronger person and found the love of her life. It was a trial, that much was for sure, but well worth it.

As she lay against his chest with her eyes closed, she felt him sit up a little.

“No, I’m not ready,” she whispered. “Just a few more minutes.”

Eric tapped her on the shoulder, and she opened her eyes.

Standing at the end of their bed was a young boy that they knew from the village, maybe twelve years old. He worked in the

small outdoor market where they bought their food. His pin-straight black hair was a mess, his dark skin soaked with sweat, and his black eyes panicked. He was scared and out of breath. He held up a piece of paper with their photos on it. “A man in the village, a white man,” he said in English, “he is looking for you.”

Author's note

Thank you for reading my book! I would love to hear from you. You can email me from my website, www.Antocci.com, or follow me on [Facebook](#) and introduce yourself. I personally respond to everyone. You will also find news about my other books on both pages as it become available!

I certainly hope you had as much fun reading the book as I had writing it. If you liked it, please tell a friend – or better yet tell the world by writing a quick review on [the Amazon page](#). Even a few short sentences are helpful. As an independently published author, I don't have a marketing department behind me. I have you, the reader. So please, spread the word!

Thanks again so very much!

All the best – Dave

ESCAPE

Past Sins

Abby has put her past in the rearview mirror and carved out a life with Eric on an isolated island; their own personal slice of paradise. But after having her new life shaken to the core, Abby comes out of hiding to get her memory back and reunite with the part of herself she left behind – though nothing can prepare her for her forgotten sins and the dangerous men awaiting her return.

Coming out of their self-imposed exile, Abby and Eric embark on a journey to the other side of the world. They have a plan to reclaim a piece of her past and forever bury the secret location of their new life, creating a peaceful future for themselves.

Stalked on their journey by guardian angels and instruments of the devil alike, their plan comes to fruition, but at the ultimate cost. While she can run, Abby cannot escape her frightful past.

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